

MISSIONAL VITALITY AND THE

FUTURE

OF THE PAOC

by Andrew Gabriel & Adam Stewart

In light of how the PAOC leadership has framed the 2020 Initiative, one might be inclined to think that plateauing or declining growth within the PAOC is causally related to a decrease in theological, spiritual, and missional vitality within the denomination.¹ In other words, one might suppose that PAOC congregations are not adding many new members and new churches because PAOC clergy and laity are not sufficiently engaged in theological reflection, spiritual practices, and missional (that is, externally focused) activities.

The PAOC General Executive have rightly “recognized that spiritual and theological vitality are essential in order to be effective missionally.”² In the last two issues of *Enrich*, we explained that the results of the 2014 survey of PAOC credential holders would be difficult to interpret as a straightforward decline of theological and spiritual vitality among PAOC clergy (information about the survey can be found at <http://paocbeliefs.weebly.com>). Hence, it is unlikely that the current state of theological and spiritual vitality among clergy is a significant cause of slowing growth within the PAOC (our study did not address the vitality of PAOC laity). In this article, we examine responses from the 2014 survey of PAOC credential holders that might indicate missional vitality. Is there anything to indicate that the theology and practices of PAOC credential holders no longer support missional vitality, and if that is not the case, what alternative explanations might account for slowing growth within the denomination?

PENTECOSTAL THEOLOGY SUPPORTING MISSIONAL VITALITY

Historically, the four-fold gospel (a succinct expression of Pentecostal theology) has supported missional vitality among Pentecostals. The four-fold gospel includes the idea that Jesus is the “coming King,” which fuelled the mission in these “last days,” as well as the idea that

Jesus is the Spirit baptizer, thereby empowering believers for mission. In 2014, credential holders indicated that they continued to preach on these themes at nearly the same rate as Carl Verge observed they did in the 1980s. On average, they reported preaching on the second coming of Christ 4.2 times per year in 2014 compared to 4.9 times a year in 1985/86, and preaching on the baptism in the Holy Spirit 4.2 times per year in 2014 compared to 4.9 times a year in 1985/86. These statistics indicate that PAOC credential holders continue to preach on themes which support missional vitality.³

The theme of Jesus as Saviour is also a part of the four-fold gospel. Soteriology has a great effect on the church’s mission in that it significantly shapes both one’s desire to engage in mission as well as one’s understanding of what that mission should be. Some credential holders have expressed concern that pluralism or some form of universalism may be taking hold in the PAOC. Both of these beliefs might represent a lack of support for missional vitality. Our research indicates that universalism and pluralism are not dominant ideologies among credential holders. First, with respect to universalism, only four per cent of credential holders agreed with the statement, “God will eventually save all of humanity.” Second, with respect to pluralism, only two per cent of credential holders agreed that “Christians and Hindus worship the same God in different forms.” Clearly, credential holders make virtually no room for universalism or pluralism.

Another issue regarding soteriology that might provide evidence of a lack of support for missional vitality concerns itself specifically with theology of religions. Some within the PAOC might be troubled by the fact that, in 2014, 38 per cent of credential holders agreed that “God will save some people who have never heard the gospel,” and that 21 per cent of credential holders agreed that “God will save some people who are part of religions other than Christianity.” The majority



of credential holders do not agree with these statements; nevertheless, we do wish to clarify that these statements do not indicate the presence of pluralism among PAOC credential holders. In other words, the idea that Christ's atoning death might be sufficient to save people who have never heard the gospel or who belong to religions other than Christianity is not synonymous with universalism or pluralism.

We cannot be sure whether or not these views are on the rise among credential holders because the above questions were not included in Verge's survey from the 1980s. That being said, we have some reason to believe that such views might actually decline in the future because they are held more strongly among older credential holders and less strongly among younger credential holders. For example, 28 per cent of credential holders 61 years of age or older agreed that "God will save some people who are part of religions other than Christianity," whereas only 18 per cent of those between 20 to 40 years of age agreed with this statement. Since the younger group holds to a more conservative soteriology on this point, it is possible that PAOC credential holders might become more conservative as a whole over time. It is also possible, however, that this difference is the result of an aging effect; that is, credential holders might change their opinions—from less to more support—on this issue as they age.

Future speculations aside, we believe that the current soteriological views of credential holders support missional vitality. First, the above theological opinions are being held at a time when the number of PAOC global and Mission Canada workers has increased by 86 per cent in the past five years, from 265 workers in 2009 to 493 workers in 2014.⁴ This increase in mission workers is a sign of missional vitality. Second, those who identified themselves as holding their credentials with the International Missions department (who, one might suppose, possess missional vitality), share the theological views of the rest of credential holders—they are just as likely (21 per cent) as all credential holders to agree that "God will save some people who are part of religions other than Christianity," and they were actually slightly more likely to agree that "God will eventually save all of humanity" (6 per cent, versus 4 per cent among all credential holders). Third, aside from current PAOC global workers, there are clear historical examples of individuals who had significant evangelistic and missional impulses in their ministries and yet held similar theological views, one of the most notable being Billy Graham. Graham far from embraces universalism and regularly emphasizes that "only Christ can give us lasting hope." At the same time, by the 1960s, Graham was open to the possibility that God might save some who had never heard the gospel, including those from other religions.⁵ These three observations do not clarify



whether or not God saves people who have not heard the gospel, but they do give us reason to think that the presence of such beliefs among a minority of credential holders does not represent a lack of support for missional vitality.

Overall, the responses of credential holders to those questions from the 2014 survey that might indicate the presence of missional vitality suggest that their theology and practices do support missional vitality. Parallel research would have to be conducted among laity within the denomination in order to assess missional vitality among PAOC congregations as a whole.

MISSIONAL VITALITY AND CANADIAN SOCIETY

Most credential holders will be aware that the PAOC experienced steady growth from its inception in 1919 through to the 1990s, after which time growth slowed within the denomination.⁶ This slowing likely does not indicate a decline in missional vitality in the PAOC, nor a decline in theological or spiritual vitality (as potential causes of decline in missional vitality). Rather than thinking that a decline in growth was primarily the result of factors internal to the PAOC, it is more likely that factors in Canadian society as a whole have been the primary cause of this change.

In 2013, PAOC churches reported nearly 13,000 conversions; however, in the same year, the total number of people served in the denomination dropped by 1.8 percent.⁷ Clearly, there are numerous factors that affect church membership aside from conversions. Historically, conversions to Christianity have played a relatively minor role in Christian congregational and denominational growth in Canada and the United States. The predominant factors that have influenced church growth have been birth rates and immigration from largely Christian countries. Bruce Guenther explains: “Despite a common perception that evangelical growth in Canada has been generated primarily by proselytization and defections from mainstream denominations, a closer analysis identifies other factors, including slightly higher than average birth rates, the ability to retain a higher proportion of their children and geographically mobile members within the church, and the higher level of expectations placed upon members.” Guenther continues, “Few Christian traditions in Canada have benefited as much during the twentieth century from immigration and the intentional promotion of multiculturalism as have evangelical Protestants.”⁸ In other words, the fact that both evangelical birth rates and the proportion of Christian immigrants have decreased in Canada and the United States over the last few decades largely explains the current demographic challenges that evangelical congregations and denominations are currently experiencing in these two countries.

Aside from demographic changes to Canada’s population, today’s Canadian church also faces significant cultural challenges which were not as intense just a few decades ago. Perhaps two of the most significant are pluralism and individualism. Pluralism challenges Christianity’s claims of absolute truth. Regarding the influence of individualism, the leadership of the PAOC rightly note that “we are increasingly dealing with people who have a self-determined view of truth.”⁹ Canadian society and culture, to say the least, is not the same

as it was in the heydays of PAOC growth. Denominational leaders, pastors, and laity need to educate themselves on these and the many other changes that have occurred within Canadian society if they hope to develop the types of mission strategies that will be required to meet the outcomes outlined in the PAOC's 2020 Initiative.

CONCLUSION

It is unlikely that the current state of theological and spiritual vitality among clergy is the primary cause for the slowing growth of the PAOC in recent decades. Rather, broader social forces have introduced impediments to congregational growth and church planting that are not entirely dependent on the evangelistic efforts of the clergy and laity. Although Sam Reimer and Michael Wilkinson are correct to point out that current social forces mean that “the future of institutional Christian religion in Canada does not look promising,” this realization should encourage missional innovation rather than resignation.¹⁰ While there are real signs of numerical decline on the horizon for Canadian evangelicals, they remain the one segment of Canadian Christianity that has, so far, avoided the rather precipitous “emptying of the pews” experienced within Roman Catholicism and mainline Protestantism. In short, if there was ever a time for the PAOC and other evangelicals to embrace a radical mission initiative, now is that time. If current trends continue and significant changes are not made, the passing of another few decades will see much of the financial and institutional capacity of Canadian evangelical congregations erode to the point where recovery might become next to impossible. May God guide and empower us as we work together to see the PAOC 2020 Initiative come to fruition.

..... en.

BIO

Andrew Gabriel, PhD, is assistant professor of theology at Horizon College and Seminary, Saskatoon, Sask. He blogs at www.andrewgabriel.wordpress.com.

Adam Stewart, PhD, is an archivist at Algoma University, Sault Ste. Marie, Ont., and an adjunct professor at Master's College and Seminary, Peterborough, Ont.

ENDNOTES

- 1 “PAOC 2020 Initiative Update: July 2014,” *testimony* Vol. 95, No. 5, 3–5.
- 2 David Wells, “2020 Missional Initiative—Canada,” *testimony* Vol. 95, No. 5, 2.
- 3 Statistics from 1985/86 are taken from Carl Verge, “A Comparison of the Beliefs and Practices of Two Groups of Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada Ministers: Those with a Master's Degree and Those with Only Three Years of Bible College Training” (PhD dissertation, New York University, 1987). Available for download at: <http://paocbeliefs.weebly.com/findings.html>. To determine a “total” for the 1985/86 data set, we calculated a weighted average for the two groups that Carl Verge surveyed. We wish to thank Kevin Shanahan from Environics Research Group Limited for providing these calculations.
- 4 “PAOC Fellowship Statistics as at January 5, 2015,” accessed June 9, 2015, <https://paoc.org/docs/default-source/fellowship-services-docs/fellowship-stats-2015-at-5-january-2015.pdf>.
- 5 Grant Wacker, *America's Pastor: Billy Graham and the Shaping of a Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2014), 200, 202.
- 6 *Who is the PAOC? Current Stats 2005* (Mississauga: The Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada, 2005).
- 7 “PAOC Fellowship Statistics as at January 5, 2015.”
- 8 Bruce L. Guenther, “Ethnicity and Evangelical Protestants in Canada,” in *Christianity and Ethnicity in Canada*, eds. Paul Bramadat and David Seljak (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 365, 398. Likewise, Sam Reimer and Michael Wilkinson, *A Culture of Faith: Evangelical Congregations in Canada* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015), 47–52, 206–7. Regarding the United States see, Mark Chaves, *American Religion: Contemporary Trends* (Princeton, UK: Princeton University Press, 2011).
- 9 “PAOC 2020 Initiative Update: July 2014.” Also see Reimer and Wilkinson, 38, 48, 54–55, 58.
- 10 Reimer and Wilkinson, 50.

