

SPIRITUAL VITALITY

AMONG PAOC CREDENTIAL HOLDERS

by Adam Stewart & Andrew Gabriel

1) INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to possess spiritual vitality in the context of the PAOC? No doubt the answer to this question will depend on whom you ask, when in history you ask the question, and perhaps even which article you read in this edition of *Enrich*. In the last issue of *Enrich*, we briefly outlined what some of the findings from the 2014 survey of PAOC credential holders revealed about the state of theological vitality in the PAOC (a report outlining our initial findings can be found at <http://paocbeliefs.weebly.com/findings.html>). We concluded that although some earlier PAOC beliefs are currently being rethought by credential holders, there is also strong consistency, as well as an increasing consensus, among credential holders regarding a wide variety of theological beliefs. In this issue of *Enrich*, we turn our attention to the topic of spiritual vitality in the PAOC and provide admittedly preliminary answers to three questions: (1) What does a spiritual profile of an average PAOC credential holder look like? (2) Do PAOC credential holders spend the same amount of time engaging in spiritual practices in 2014 as they did in 1985/86? (3) Has the understanding of what constitutes spiritual vitality changed among PAOC credential holders over the last three decades?

2) SPIRITUAL PROFILE OF AN AVERAGE PAOC CREDENTIAL HOLDER

The 2014 survey of PAOC credential holders included a few important questions regarding the spiritual practices and habits of credential holders that allow us to develop at least a rudimentary

spiritual profile of an average PAOC credential holder. In 2014, the average PAOC credential holder reported spending 35 minutes each day in prayer and 28 minutes each day reading the Bible. They also reported that in the 12 months prior to completing the survey, they had prayed or sung in tongues 155 times, fasted for spiritual reasons 17 times, given a word of prophecy 10 times, witnessed distinct physical healings seven times, given a message in tongues three times, and read 14 books.¹ Not all of the above activities directly relate to the individual spirituality of credential holders. They do, however, help us to better understand the amount of time that credential holders might spend engaged in activities that have traditionally been associated with spiritual vitality within the PAOC.

The average amount of time that PAOC credential holders reported spending in prayer and Bible reading each week in 2014 (7.35 hours) is noticeably less than that reported by conservative Protestant clergy in the United States about a decade ago (10 hours), and much closer to the amount of time spent on these practices by mainline Protestant clergy in the United States (six hours).² This data suggests the possibility that PAOC clergy spend less time engaged in prayer and Bible reading than their counterparts in the United States; however, it is just as possible that this disparity is due to the fact that these two data sets were collected a decade apart from one another. More denominationally specific and current data from the United States is required in order to confirm this.



3) CHANGES IN THE SPIRITUAL PRACTICES OF PAOC CREDENTIAL HOLDERS

The data that we collected indicates that credential holders did not participate in a number of spiritual practices in 2014 as frequently as they did three decades ago. In 1985/86, for instance, credential holders reported fasting 26 times a year compared with 17 times a year in 2014, representing a decrease of 35 per cent.³

Engagement in some spiritual practices traditionally associated with the gifts of the Spirit also experienced a decline in frequency. In 1985/86, credential holders reported witnessing nine physical healings and giving a message in tongues 15 times a year, while in 2014 they reported engaging in these activities only seven and three times, respectively. Particularly noteworthy is the 80 per cent decrease in the practice of giving a message in tongues reported by credential holders in 2014 when compared to credential holders in 1985/86. In fact, so drastic was this change that in 2014, 81 per cent of credential holders reported not giving a single message in tongues

during the past 12 months, while in 1985/86 only 42 per cent of credential holders responded the same way.

One possible explanation for this radical decrease, as we hypothesized at the outset of this study, is that PAOC credential holders (and also very likely laity within the denomination) are less frequently expressing practices for which there might exist lower levels of acceptance within the broader evangelical subculture than exist within the PAOC. In other words, as credential holders engage with non-Pentecostal evangelical clergy, congregations, and subculture with increasing depth and regularity, they may be modifying some traditional practices so that they more closely fit within the limits of what constitutes the consensus of broader evangelical orthopraxis. It is also possible that credential holders are redirecting expressions of less acceptable practices, like giving a public message in tongues, to expressions of more acceptable practices, such as singing or praying in tongues (a practice not measured by Carl Verge's 1985/86 survey). This might serve as a satisfactory compromise for PAOC

clergy desiring to increase their engagement with broader evangelical subculture, while at the same time remaining connected with at least some aspects of traditional Pentecostal spirituality, as Adam Stewart has argued elsewhere.⁴

An important instance of departure from the overall narrative of decline in spiritual practices is an increase in the practice of prophecy. In 1985/86, credential holders reported giving a word of prophecy five times a year, while in 2014 this number doubled to 10 times a year. At first blush this appears to contradict the otherwise consistent decline in spiritual practices reported by credential holders in 2014. Although credential holders could certainly be participating in prophecy at greater rates than they were in 1985/86 for reasons that are not yet understood, this increase in the practice of prophecy could be another instance of credential holders redirecting expressions of what they understand to be less acceptable practices to expressions of what they perceive to be more acceptable practices. Put another way, credential holders could be replacing practices that are more difficult to divorce from their traditionally demonstrative and public manifestations, such as giving a message in tongues, with practices that are more easily adapted to less emotive and intimate applications, such as prophecy. Changes to the ways that credential holders express their spirituality (including both decreases and increases in participation in various spiritual practices) could partially be the result of changing views of what constitutes spiritual vitality.

4) CHANGING ATTITUDES REGARDING SPIRITUAL VITALITY

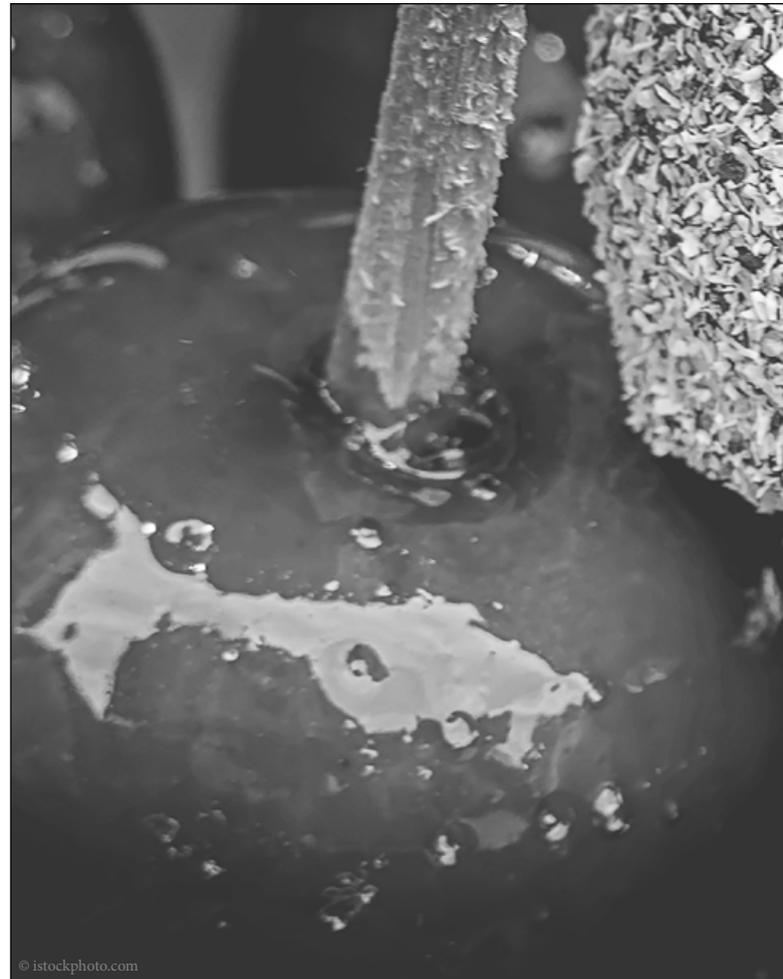
Another interesting result that the survey revealed concerning the spirituality of credential holders was a shift in opinion regarding exactly what constitutes spiritual vitality as well as what some of the most effective methods are through which spirituality is transmitted and nurtured within congregations.

A key component of the PAOC leadership's definition of spiritual vitality includes "Christ-honouring living."⁵ In some cases, however, what credential holders believed comprised this type of behaviour in 1985/86 differed substantially from what they reported in 2014. For example, although the majority of credential holders still agree with the statement, "Christian believers should not purchase lottery tickets," agreement decreased from 92 per cent among 1985/86 respondents to 61 per cent among 2014 respondents. We found a more significant shift in opinion regarding the statement, "PAOC believers should refrain from participation in sports activities on Sundays," with agreement decreasing from 70 per cent in 1985/86 to only 16 per cent in 2014.

Similarly, credential holders' views regarding alcohol consumption have shifted significantly. In 1985/86, 92 per cent of credential holders agreed that "Christian believers should never participate in the drinking of alcoholic beverages," whereas in 2014 only 34 per cent agreed with this statement. Credential holders in 2014 were divided regarding whether or not PAOC ministers, more specifically, should be able to drink alcohol (50 per cent of respondents agreed that "PAOC ministers should never participate in the drinking of alcoholic beverages"). Nevertheless, 67 per cent of respondents reported having drunk no alcohol during the past 12 months. The remaining 33 per cent of 2014 respondents reported having had one

or more alcoholic drinks over the same period of time, in contrast to seven per cent among 1985/86 respondents. Shifts regarding participation in behaviours such as lotteries, sports on Sunday, and alcohol consumption illustrate that PAOC credential holders today have redefined what they understand to be "Christ-honouring living," which, according to the framework provided by the leadership of the PAOC, implies that they hold a different view of what constitutes spiritual vitality.

Opinions have also changed regarding the methods through which spirituality is transmitted and nurtured within congregations, particularly concerning Sunday school and Sunday evening services. In 1985/86, 80 per cent of credential holders agreed that "the Sunday School is essential to the spiritual life of the church," and 97 per cent agreed that "Sunday evening services should be maintained," while only 68 per cent and 26 per cent of credential holders, respectively, agreed with these statements in 2014. We do not have sufficient information to determine whether or not the declining importance with which credential holders regard Sunday school and Sunday evening services is due to dissatisfaction with how these venues contribute to the spiritual development of their congregations, or is perhaps due to dissatisfaction with their current implementation (that is, what happens at these venues). At the very least, it is likely that the declining regard that clergy hold for Sunday school and Sunday evening services is reflective of the opinions that their



congregations hold for these two venues, which, based on the laity's meagre attendance in many instances, is very little.

5) SPIRITUAL VITALITY TODAY?

Is there less spiritual vitality among PAOC credential holders today than there was in the 1980s? Our data, ultimately, does not answer this question. Overall, the survey revealed that, on average, credential holders in 2014 did not engage in several spiritual practices as frequently as they did in 1985/86. This change might indicate that credential holders do not possess as much spiritual vitality today as they did 30 years ago. Alternatively, it is also possible that they possess just as much spiritual vitality as they previously did, but that, as a result of their changing view of what constitutes spiritual vitality, they now express their spirituality in different ways. Remember that credential holders reported prophesying twice as much in 2014 as they did in 1985/86, which suggests the possibility that they may have increased their participation in other spiritual practices that the survey did not attempt to measure. What we can say with confidence is that, first, the frequency with which current credential holders engage in a number of spiritual practices has declined considerably over the last three decades; and, second, credential holders have changed their understanding of what constitutes spiritual vitality (according to the definition provided by PAOC leadership) rather noticeably. These observations should, at the very least, prompt further conversation within the Fellowship regarding the topic of spirituality.

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BIO

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ENDNOTES

1. Within the field of the sociology of the clergy, the amount of time that clergy spend reading is commonly understood as a correlate to spiritual development. See Jackson W. Carroll, *God's Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006), 108.
2. Ibid.
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 to 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. Adam Stewart, *The New Canadian Pentecostals* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2015).
5. David Wells, "A Spiritually Vital Fellowship," *testimony*, September/October 2014, 34.

