THE PROMISE OF NEW MONASTICISM IN A SECULAR AGE

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Author

Rev'd Dr. Tim Dickau teaches at the Center of Missional Leadership at St. Andrew's Hall, Vancouver, BC, and directs Citygate Vancouver, an organization aimed towards helping churches collaborate to address systemic issues. Previously, Tim was pastor at Grandview Church for thirty years. During his pastoral tenure, the church refocused its mission in this neighborhood and developed numerous initiatives for community housing, refugee housing, a children's performing arts group, a social enterprise developer, and an urban retreat space, as well as a second congregation. Tim is the author of two books, including *Plunging into the Kingdom Way: Practicing the Shared Strokes of Community, Hospitality, Justice and Confession* (Cascade Books 2011), and *Forming Christian Communities in a Secular Age: Recovering Humility and Hope* (Tyndale Academic Press 2021).

Editors' Introduction

In this Temple Tract, Tim Dickau explores the question of how Christian communities can be formed to navigate a secular age.

In the first half of this tract, Dickau helps us understand both secularism and the powers of our age. Following Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (2007), he explores how and why these barriers to transcendence pose a challenge to being the church in his own city of Vancouver, Canada. In the process of describing the challenges posed by these powers, he illustrates how most Christian models of the church have proved inadequate to the call to participate in renewing the work of God.

In the second half of this tract, Dickau considers three responses to these powers. In his summary of his church's three-decade journey, Dickau reflects on how the church where he had served as a pastor for thirty-years had pursued a new monastic pathway. Further, he explores how this new monasticism can recommend a promising road for churches in navigating this uncontrollable secular age.

Tim Middleton, Series Editor
Ryan Haecker, Assistant Editor

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Introduction

Forming Christian communities in our secular age is not straightforward, especially in Vancouver, Canada. On the edge of the Pacific Northwest of North America, Vancouver is renowned for being a secular city, in part because of low church attendance (less than 10 % weekly attendance). After pastoring a church on the east side of the city from 1990-2020, I can personally attest to the challenge of forming such a community. From the time my spouse, and I arrived, I met numerous people in our neighbourhood who did not know of our church, had never been inside a church building of any sort, and who shared a suspicion of churches and a caution about working with them. Even in the 1990s, Church-run residential schools for Indigenous children with sexual abuse by priests, pushy proselytizing, harm done to LGBTQ+ folk, and theologically driven environmental exploitation were all named as key reasons for this response.

I began as a pastor at Grandview church fresh out of seminary at 26 years old with a congregation that was seemingly on its last legs. When we moved to this declining and somewhat decrepit neighbourhood, most people attending the church had already moved away and abandoned it. The congregation of around 50 people, mostly seniors, had disconnected from both the other people and the cultural and political life of the neighbourhood. Post-COVID-19, I have heard stories from denominational leaders across the country of how this already common story was becoming endemic across Canada.

Christendom had already crumbled in Vancouver. Yet there was still a naïve expectation among many church members that if we fixed up the sanctuary, built a new sign, and advertised our worship, then we could easily fill the church on a Sunday again. I call this the 'Field of Dreams' myth: "if we build it, they will come". While a few churches might attract people, the demise of the Christendom model has accelerated during COVID-19. The move to online modes of engagement has reinforced the idea that worship is largely a spectator event, and perhaps one that is not all that attractive. This raises an important question: how might we develop churches that form persons amidst a thicker shared life, and that engage their neighbourhoods more deeply with gospel-shaped living?

To help us explore this question, I will turn first to Charles Taylor's work *A Secular Age* (2007). Taylor explores the conditions of secularism that dominate the Western world in the last half millennium. When considered in conjunction

with powers like autonomy, inequality, entrenched racism, and global warming, these conditions of secularism have led many to feel like the world that we endeavour to understand, manipulate, and control is nonetheless uncontrollable (Rosa, 2020). Rosa identifies how the days of trying to control our world and live with modernist solutions are fading, while also describing how engagement with the resonance of this uncontrollability offers a potential source of meaning and vitality. From a theological perspective, I wonder whether this place of resonance can also become a fertile site to recover an awareness of divine agency.

Following this description, I describe three responses that churches are making to these seemingly uncontrollable powers, including that we sought to make at Grandview church. Our focus on forming a parish-based, neo-monastic church led us to begin various community housing projects, an organisation supporting refugees, a social enterprise, a performing arts group, an urban retreat, and eventually a second congregation. After summarising our efforts, I will reflect upon the promise of renewed monasticism in an uncontrollable secular age.

Part I
Tough Soil for the Church

Chapter 1

Understanding our Secular Age

In *A Secular Age (2007)*, Charles Taylor asks how we have moved from a time when most people believed in God—even if they were not devout—and when God was considered to be part of the social order, to an age when many people are only focused upon human flourishing or the flourishing of the physical world without any explicit transcendent framework. He asks, "How did we move from a condition where, in Christendom, people lived naively within a theistic construal, to one in which we all shunt between two stances, in which everyone's construal shows up as such; and in which moreover, unbelief has become for many the major default option" (2007, p. 14). Over the last five hundred years, public spaces have pushed religion to its edges (which he identifies as secularity 1), and belief and the practice of faith have also declined in most Western countries (which he identifies as secularity 2). Moreover, both belief and non-belief have become optional, contested, and pressured so that believers and non-believers alike are "fragilized," such that expressions of both belief and unbelief are regularly challenged and therefore do not seem as certain (2007, pp. 20–27). In this new age, we all live with "cross-pressures" (2007, p. 15), where any believer, atheist, or anything in-between will be challenged by sensible people who think differently (which Taylor identifies as a key condition of secularity 3).

This third form of secularity, which is characterised by the option of either believing or not believing, has been accompanied by secularity 1 and 2 as well. Urban theologian Ray Bakke, who instigated city consultations across North America and Asia, commented that Vancouver was a laboratory for all three types of secularism — and has been for a long time! As an American, he notes how trends in Vancouver or Seattle often foreshadow trends that other cities across the continent will express years later.

Taylor's thesis illuminates the "social imaginary" within which I work in Vancouver. He describes a social imaginary as "the way ordinary people imagine their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms, it is carried in images, stories, legends, etc." (2007, p. 172). His story of secularisation

has functioned for me as a map, locating historically where, when, and how these responses have emerged. e not only puts a dent into "subtraction theories" of secularisation, but he also describes the vibe and ethos of our shift towards secularism, identifying the story of secularity three as a "coming of age" narrative, where the shift towards a secular worldview is one of "growing up", "facing reality", "becoming mature", or "giving up myths" rather than a purely rational or logical conclusion from the evidence at hand (2007, pp. 367–369). Moreover, he describes how secularity three has involved an assertive search for meaning apart from God within two primary frames: technology, and aesthetics. These two avenues for meaning sometimes push back against each other in a kind of to-and-fro in our neighbourhood.

Taylor's alternative narrative of secularity has helped open my eyes to how our culture has become more impervious to God's action in the world. Of many shifts that Taylor narrates, I will highlight just three which are prevalent in Vancouver. For a fuller summary of Taylor's book see Dickau (2021, pp. 1-25).

1.1. From the Porous to the Buffered Self

Once, humans were embedded within a social and cosmic order that was given and sanctioned by God. Between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Taylor identifies three key historical developments that worked collectively to disembed us from society, to disembed society from the cosmos, and to disembed all three of these sites from God.

 "The buffered self" is, Taylor identifies, one of the first historical developments, which removed obstacles to unbelief, and eventually started us along the road to secularity. In the Middle Ages, there was a sense that the self was porous and permeable by both benevolent and malevolent spiritual forces. In that era, these spiritual forces resided in objects, places, and beings and could shape our lives in both psychic and physical ways. Corporate worship and devotion then had a protective role for all of society by keeping these spiritual forces in check.[1]

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1 These drawings appear in Dickau, *Forming Christian Communities in a Secular Age*, and are used by permission from the publisher. Thanks to Ed Siomacco for his creative illustrations of Taylor's ideas.

POROUS SELF   BUFFERED SELF
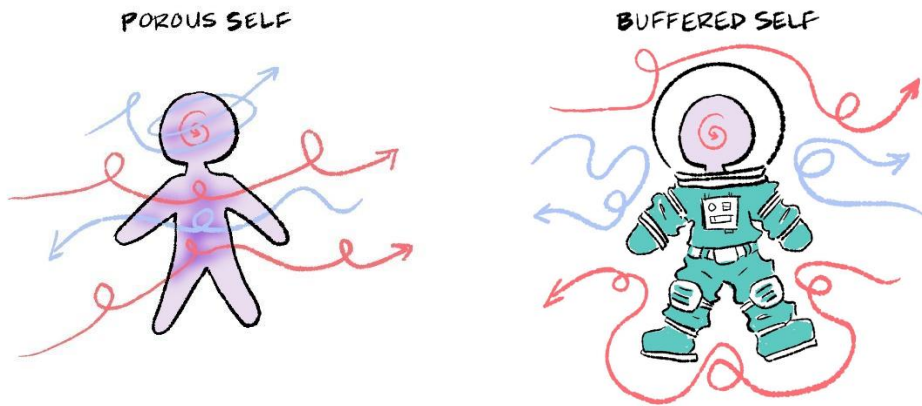
Through the late Middle Ages, our sense of meaning and self began to move from the exterior social world to the interior mental world. The locus of an object's meaning shifted from the object itself to the meaning in our minds. Along with this shift in meaning, there was a concomitant shift from a corporate identity to an individualistic identity. In both of these movements the self became less porous and more "buffered". Unlike those living in the Middle Ages, we now live with a much firmer sense of a boundary between ourselves and others, especially spiritual beings or forces. In this new context, the social role of the church both to protect society from malevolent spiritual forces and to engage the divine mystery has waned in importance. Today in Vancouver, people rarely turn to churches or clergy for "spiritual" guidance.

1.2.   From the Cosmos to the Universe

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, humans began to shift *away* from the perception that we are living in a cosmos that is created and sustained by God and *towards* the perception that we are living in an impersonal universe without final cause or purpose, a world that is devoid of ultimate meaning. With the development of the scientific method and its focus on efficient cause, questions about formal cause or overall purpose have come to be sidelined.
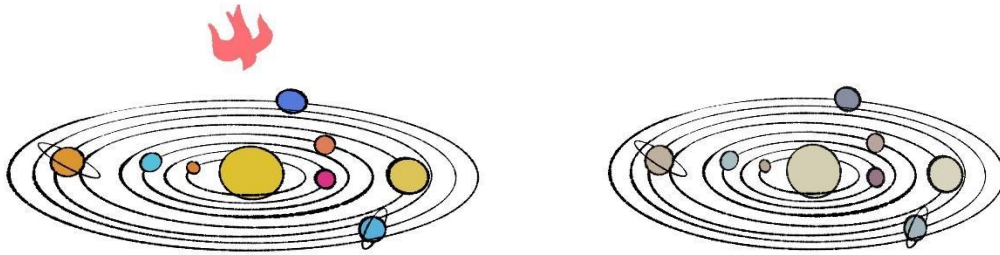
From the ancient Greeks until the Sixteenth-Century, humans understood themselves as positioned within a hierarchy of forms, where the "higher levels" were mysterious and inscrutable. However, starting in the Seventeenth-Century, these perceptions began to shift as humans began to adopt a God-like, dispassionate view of the world. From this anthropocentric perspective, the universe appears "as a system before our gaze, whereby we can grasp the whole in a kind of tableau" (p. 232). During the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries, Darwinian evolution further shifted from being a way of understanding the unfolding of creation to an explanation of how the world changes even in the absence of God's involvement - a "God's eye view" that accelerated the shift from theism to deism. Such a deist God could be imagined to set creation in motion, only thereafter to leave it to its own ends, such that impersonal "natural" forces operate apart from any divine influence. This shift towards deism coincided with new critiques of God's inaction, particularly in the face of evil (pp. 233–235).

1.3.   From Sacred Time to Monotonous Time

Along with this shift in our perceptions of the universe, our perceptions of time changed as well. When life was shaped by the liturgical calendar, there was a sense, especially during holy days, that "Good Friday 1998 is closer in a way to the original day of the crucifixion than mid-summer's day 1997" (p. 55). In the medieval frame, time was sacred and was intrinsically endowed with meaning by our participation in the cosmic unfolding of God's purposes for the world. In the

modern social imaginary, however, time is "homogenous" and "empty." Hence, all time has become uniform and devoid of sacred significance or meaning, and is increasingly filled with an oppressive sense of monotonousness (pp. 208–209). Since we no longer situate time within God's salvific activity, our experience of time has come to resemble that of the movie *Groundhog Day,* in which Phil Connors (Bill Murray) lives each day over and over again without end.
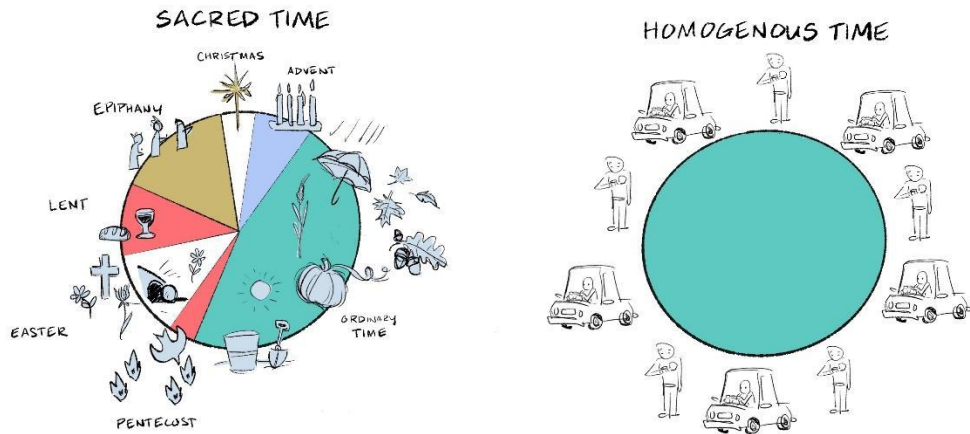
Hence, Taylor groups these three transitions together—from the porous to the buffered self, from the cosmos to the universe, from sacred to homogenous time—and collates them into what he calls the "Great Disembedding" (pp. 151–158).

Chapter 2

From the Age of Mobilization to Expressive Individualism

With the onset of what Taylor identifies as "the age of mobilization" in the 1800s when industry, business, new associations and volunteer organizations all exploded in quantity we began to see ourselves as the constructors of reality, the shapers of the world, and the controllers of our own destiny (pp. 425– 455). As a result, more people, especially the elites, began to view the self and society as humanly constructed rather than divinely ordered.

Later, with the onset of "expressive individualism" and its flourishing after the 1960s, this constructivist view of reality brought about the perception that we can only discover meaning within ourselves, and therefore our history is devoid of divinity. The popular world historian and futurist Yuval Harari has taken up this constructivist stance with gusto. He argues that we all need a narrative to propel us through life, and so we should pick one that compels us to actions of justice and compassion, since everything is up for grabs (pp. 273-313). Within the constructivist paradigm, the world becomes our playground. Yet the merry-go round of such a reality seems impossible to get off. And it seems to be making us perpetually dizzy.

2.1. Ultimate Meaning

I have repeatedly found myself having this dialogue about our struggle to find meaning with folks both within and beyond our church community. One consequence of the formation of a "buffered self" is that more of us feel as if we are living in an impersonal universe, where time is marching on without transcendent meaning, without God's involvement, where we experience God as absent or indifferent. One woman in our community, who had stopped participating in the life of the church after being a core member for several years, remarked that the notion of God acting in the world was becoming increasingly vacuous or even silly.
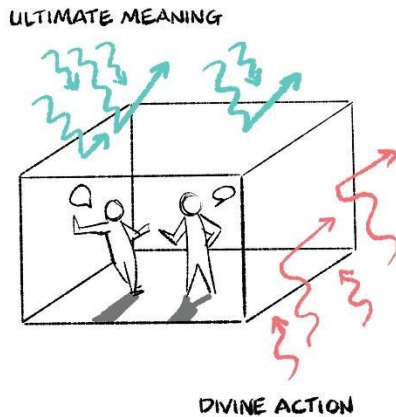
Indeed, because many of us do not easily leave our search for God behind, we experience what Taylor describes as a "malaise of modernity" (229). Taylor describes this malaise as follows: "the sense can easily arise that we are missing something, cut off from something, that we are living behind a screen ... I am thinking much more of a wide sense of malaise at the disenchanted world, a sense of it as flat, empty, a multiform search for something within, or beyond it, which could compensate for the meaning lost with transcendence" (229). As a pastor, I regularly interact with people who feel let down or disappointed because their "actions, goals, achievements and life, have a lack of weight, gravity, thickness, substance" (303). Such sentiments lead people to search even more frenetically for alternative sources of meaning within an immanent frame.
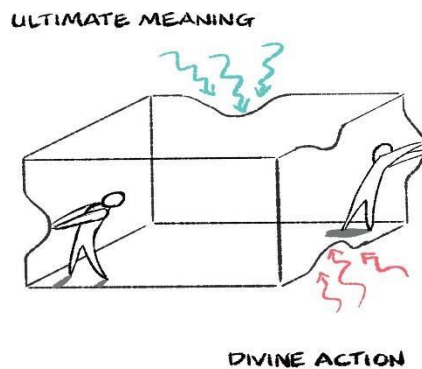
In light of this malaise, the church has an opportunity to offer people a meaningful life, where both our ordinary, day-to-day activities as well as our critical, decision-making moments become suffused with meaning as we cross

paths with the divine story of the restoration and reconciliation of all things in Christ. Of course, to proclaim this storied and meaning-filled life, we will have to figure out how to avoid getting stuck in an immanent frame ourselves.

2.2. Misshaping Powers

If we are going to respond with hope to the powers misshaping our uncontrollable age, we will need to break out of that immanent frame. In doing so, I recognize that each of these misshaping powers reflects a distortion of the goodness and beauty God intends for creation. For example, autonomy has within it an element of personhood that is a gift of God. Consumerism is a distortion of our invitation to enjoy creation. By naming and understanding the misshaping distortion of these powers, my hope is that we can resist their misshaping force, and so that we more fully bear the image of God as salt and light in the world.

These systemic powers can be imbued with spiritual forces. In the letter to the Ephesians, Paul compels the church to look beyond their struggles with other humans so that they will be alert to these powers: "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12). Walter Wink argues persuasively that these powers and authorities include demonic forces (1999). Luke Bretherton notes that the demonic can be understood in various ways: "For some it is a malignant agentic force that can be personified. For others it is a mythic and metaphorical way of framing either structural evils or psychological struggles... As a vacuum, the demonic possesses a negative energy of its own that supersedes or possesses human agency, sucking life and light out of what exists and distorting human relations" (140). (See 2021, pp. 40-67).

2.2.1. Individualism

This movement towards individual autonomy runs parallel with the development of capitalism and liberal democracy. According to Max Weber, the constitutive act of modern capitalism was the separation of business from the household, which simultaneously separated producers from the sources of their livelihood. These economic shifts reveal that we are not simply more selfish than previous generations, but that economic pressures now override familial and communal bonds.

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Robert Putnam's classic study *Bowling Alone* (2001) charts the accelerating demise of people's participation in community groups and associations between 1960 and 2000) identifying multiple factors within the North American context, including television and suburban life. Since Putnam's book was published, "screen time" occupies even more of our mental space and time through our growing reliance upon smart phones, tablets, and computers, thereby mediating more and more of our conversations and communication. We are getting out of "touch" (Richard Kearney, 2021).

Every community leader I know experiences the autonomous pressures that make our bonds with one another so tenuous. This topic often dominates pastoral conversations, where we expend energy trying to figure out how to "keep" connected to the community. Individualism overrides communal bonds like a windstorm, scattering whatever community-building efforts you have so carefully raked together.

2.2.2. Consumerism

Humans have always consumed things. Indeed, God has given us an abundant creation to tend, keep and enjoy. In identifying consumerism as a power that distorts life in our secular age, I am not endorsing a false dualism between the created world and the "spiritual" realm, for God invites us to delight in the created world and to express gratitude for its many gifts. Yet consumerism is not about *enjoying* the created world, but rather *acquiring* goods, services and experiences.

Consumerism takes over our identity and misshapes our desires when it is linked with our market economy, where it takes on a god-like role. While I recognize that the market economy has served as a means of exchange for many countries and has improved the economic well-being of many people, market economics has also been detrimental to the environment and has eroded social stability and equality.

The following are the features of consumerism that distort our humanity and block us from living into our human vocation of bearing witness to the image of God. First, consumerism seduces us to turn everything into a commodity (Naomi Klein, 1999). Second, consumerism turns truth into a consumer item. Third, consumerism tempts us to pursue a "goods" life instead of a "Good Life" (Brad Gregory, 2015, p. 235). Fourth, when consuming dominates our dreams and desires, it distracts us from our true human vocation to bear witness to the image

of God. Fifth, consumerism reduces politics to economics. Sixth, consumerism labels the poor as "bad consumers" and relegates them further to the margins. Seventh, consumerism moves us to desire the "next thing" making it in some ways the opposite of materialism (Cavanaugh 2008, p. 74).

2.2.3. Racism

Along with the powers of individualism, consumerism, notions about our racial identity have further eroded our connections to place and the created world. Thus, William James Jennings advocates for the recovery of a theology of place and a renewed theology of creation that will lead us to inhabit, honor, and share space (2012). He argues that the practices of colonialism and slavery were a failure of the Christian imagination to join others in mutuality and fraternity, a community of relationships that would be rooted in a place, as described in the gospel. Jennings offers a way to recover this Christian imagination.

If place has become in our thinking, that is, in the thinking of peoples deeply touched by the multiple legacies of the colonialist moment, nothing more than the raw materials of potential development, of the constant turnings of spaces inside commodified existence—from residential sectors, to business sectors, to religious sectors, to education sectors, or back to "natural habitats"—then we can refer to the space of joining and communion only as having a possible corner inside commodified space.

In Vancouver, for example, all the demographic data and any encounters with people who are living on the street reveal clearly that indigenous people live with disproportionately less income and poorer housing. (In 2006, Aboriginal men had 30 percent less income than non-Aboriginal men. See Stats Canada, 2006.). At Grandview, our eyes began to open to the influence of racism when we paid closer attention to the history of our neighbourhood as a displaced home to the First Nations. We also saw that as our neighbourhood gentrified, so many of our neighbours were displaced.

2.2.4. Inequality

The collective force of these powers has contributed to gross economic inequalities in our world. As Thomas Picketty demonstrates, both wealth and income inequality have continued to increase over the past two centuries (2013). While the number of people living in extreme poverty has declined in some countries

during this period, the richest have amassed unprecedented levels of wealth. In an economy where the rate of return on capital outstrips the rate of growth, he argues that inherited wealth will "dominate wealth amassed from a lifetime's labor by a wide margin." (2013, p. 74). This puts those with inherited wealth at a huge advantage and ensures that there will be a consistently widening gap between those who inherit wealth and those who earn an income.

In the twentieth century, Latin American liberation theologians spoke boldly and prophetically about inequality. In 2005, to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of Archbishop Romero's death, the University of Central America in San Salvador brought together some of the most-well known liberation theologians. Gustavo Guttierez boiled down the movement: "Liberation theology and everything surrounding it is simply a response to this question—how can we tell the poor that God loves them?"[2] What stood out for me at the conference was the testimony of a peasant woman, who said, "During the revolution, we met together, we studied the Bible and literature together, we prayed together, we organized alongside each other and we labored together. Now, no matter how poor the village, each hut has a television in one corner, and we have stopped meeting together. It's like they are trying to *put us to sleep."*

2.2.5. Climate Crisis

In *The Future of Ethics,* theologian Willlis Jenkins identifies HICC as an ethical issue for which the church and wider society is inadequately prepared to respond. He argues that frameworks about justice and injustice are much more difficult to apply when "received ideas of justice do not anticipate moral agency [that is] exercised cumulatively across generational time, aggregately through ecological systems, and non-intentionally over evolutionary futures.

The Human Induced Climate Crisis (HICC) involves dimensions of human action without precedent in our traditions and institutions of justice" (2013, p.1). Because the HICC is a structurally evil problem—one that is caused by our way of life—it is more complex to discern how we should respond. While the HICC is being pushed into the center of public life and is awakening political responses across the globe, we are still on a path to crisis.

Even if all countries follow their commitments in the Paris Agreement, many question if these actions will limit global warming to the 1.5° Celsius targe s Jenkins warns, "How earth's ecosystems will function in the future therefore

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2 Speech delivered March 27, 2005 at the University of Central America.

depends on the character and responsibility of human societies" (p. 3).

While Grandview has sought to respond creatively to many of the other powers, HICC has overwhelmed our community because the changes we need to make in our lifestyles and industry practices seem so all-encompassing. Some have protested around proposed pipelines or worked within their places of business and industry to alter current practices. Many seek to buy locally, use public transit, walk or bike to work, and limit air travel.

Chapter 3

Secularism as Idolatry

William T. Cavanaugh offers insightful analysis of Taylor's work. In Taylor's description of our disenchanted world, everyone is operating in an immanent frame, but some are seeking or choosing a transcendent option. In *Migrations of the Holy,* Cavanaugh challenges Taylor, arguing that secularism is not merely a flight *from* transcendence, but rather an attempt to search for a sense of transcendent meaning *within* an immanent frame. Hence, the practices of conferring allegiance and worship to God have not disappeared in our secular age, but rather migrated from the church to the market, the state, and the self. While Taylor describes these expressions of allegiance and worship as symbolic gestures that do not hold ultimate meaning, Cavanaugh contends that such gestures are signs of worship of the idols of the market, the state, and the self.

The word "idolatry" can have a triumphal ring—where some are idolaters and others are not. Suspicions of idolatry have been misused in colonial history to condemn groups whom the missionaries did not understand (See Jennings, 2012, pp.96-102). Cavanaugh cautions against this usage and aims his critique elsewhere. He argues that from a biblical perspective, idolatry is about how we *behave* rather than what we *believe.* He cites the biblical examples of adultery and political disloyalty, which define idolatry according to a continuum, rather than as explicitly attributing divinity to objects. For example, in the parable of the rich man and the harvest, Jesus warns his listeners that we treat money as an idol whenever we trust in money to provide divine security. By removing the "us" versus "them" framework, this idolatry critique reveals how we are all susceptible to mi ordering our allegiances.

3.1. Responding to the Powers of our Age

How can we respond meaningfully to these powers and forces in light of the particularities of our secular age? In responding to this question, I will first identify two responses that we will need to *resist* as we engage these powers. The first response of *giving in* is lacking in humility; the second response of *giving up* is lacking in hope. Both responses, however, fail to bear witness to the vision of

shalom, and the call to justice that is at the heart of the gospel.

3.1.1. Giving In

Were we to simply try to ignore these powers and the spiritual forces that lie behind them, they would co-opt us by misshaping our desires, and distorting the mission of our churches. We might describe this response as *giving in.* One symptom of this response is forming churches that have a cozy relationship with the powers. Such churches appeal to our individualistic impulses and ask for a fragmented piece of our lives that will not inconvenience us, or they offer better consumer experiences that will help us pursue "the good life" with more gusto. Such churches leave a few leftovers for the poor, yet neglect to call us to impact our culture, much less to participate in the transformative vision of the kingdom of God. Another symptom of this response is when we avoid talking about or grappling with controversial subjects, such as racism, inequality, or global warming, because we are afraid that doing so will be divisive or will disturb us from "lounging on our couches" (Amos 6:4)

From this perspective, simply offering "better" worship music or preaching in our church services will not help us resist these forces. Yet for too long, we have believed that other improvements in the shape of our worship or the structures of our governance or mission will help us overcome the challenges of our secular age. While some churches do very well at attracting a crowd through their preaching or music, and other churches implement new structures to empower mission, if we surmise that a one-hour performance will liberate us from the powers and revive the mission of the church, we lack humility. We need a deeper formation.

3.1.2. Giving Up

We can also respond to the powers by *giving up* on Christian community or even God. In a study of religions "nones," Joel Theiseen and Sarah Wilkins-LaFlamme highlight the increasing percentage of those who self-identify as having no religion within each successive generation over the last hundred years.

Figure A1.1
Percentage of Religious Nones in Canada by Year (1985–2012)
and by Birth Cohort (based on 5-year intervals between 1905–1995)

Year	Birth cohort

Joel Thiessen clarifies that "nones" are not necessarily atheists. A good percentage of "nones" still believe in God or supernatural activity, and often continue to value the role of church in society (2013, pp.113-121). Some "nones" reject faith because they perceive exclusivity in the church, or they disconnect from church during life transitions, or they feel too busy for church, or they intellectually disagree with church doctrine or belief. Such reasons have become familiar tunes that pastors hear in the departure stories of parishioners.

The position that Taylor describes as the option of unbelief has thus become increasingly prevalent. Most pastors I know in the Pacific Northwest feel as if the "nones" are winning the day. In a recent survey by the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, half of all Canadians identified themselves as agnostic, atheist or unreligious, and only one-tenth attend religious services weekly. (Hiemstra, 2020).

3.2. A Third Way: Death and Resurrection

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul declares with particular verve that the good news about Jesus, the Messiah, is bearing fruit all over the world. Through the Gospel, God is gathering a people from around the world, delivering them from the powers of darkness, and forming them into a holy people so that they might participate in the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. God is doing this through Christ, the one in whom the fullness of God dwells and through whom the goodness of creation is being restored and reconciled to God, and to God's loving purposes for the world. (See Dickau 2021). In one sense, a letter like Colossians awakens us to the reality that divine charity permeates creation, despite our inability to take note. This letter calls us to forsake idolatry, and to lean into the divine.

Part II
New Monasticism

Chapter 4

Summarizing Grandview Church s Thirty-Year Response

Grandview's story is a narrative of new monasticism. Like other small communities, all "twelve marks of new monasticism" eventually emerged in our community (Rutba House, 2005). We did not pursue these marks because we set out to become a new monastic community. Rather, they emerged as we observed similar cultural powers and sought to engage and counteract them in response to pursuing the theological vision of the Kingdom of God.

These practices have helped our community navigate our way through the powers of our secular age. We have sought to redeem what is good and true in the distorted powers, while also resisting what is false and destructive. In particular, we have sought to cultivate personhood in community, rather than alienating autonomy. And we have sought to enjoy and preserve God's creation as a gift rather than using goods as throwaway brands. My thesis is that for us to respond to these powers, we should work to share an analogical similitude in the image of God, do this best amidst a thicker shared life in a particular place, and engage systemic issues in pursuit of justice and shalom.

4.1. The First Ten Years: Becoming a Parish Community

In the first ten years of my pastoral tenure, we began to re-establish ourselves as a parish community reflecting the diversity of our very diverse neighbourhood. My wife, Mary and I and our six-month-old son moved into the neighbourhood and were looking to make friends our own age to complement the friendships we were making with the seniors from our church. That led us to begin a parent's group in our church building, which we were cleaning and rebuilding in these first years after a decade of disrepair. I ended up running the children's program while Mary led the group. The senior women of our church helped with this program and began to love these parents. Slowly we were learning what it meant

to take up the practice of a mutual hospitality where we gave and received from each other.

We were discovering in these years what Christine Pohl says about the practice of hospitality: "Faithful hospitality usually involves laying our lives down in little pieces, in small acts of sacrificial love and service. Part of the mystery is that while such concrete acts of love are costly, they nourish and heal both giver and recipient" (1999, p.34). A good number of these parents became followers of Christ, joined the church, and breathed some new life into our older adults as well. Over time, this practice of mutual hospitality, became part of the culture of the community and shaped so much of who we became.

This shared life of hospitality led to another formative practice, that of welcoming the poor and the stranger. One central context for this mutual welcome was at our weekly meal and shelter, Out of the Cold (later called Crossroads). At a local neighbourhood areas services team meeting, one of the many people present working in social services, health and education asked me what the churches were doing for the increasing number of homeless people on Commercial drive. At the time, the "Drive" was beginning to gentrify but was still a place of relative welcome and gathering place for people facing poverty. My reply to that question was "Nothing that I know of". I relayed that conversation in our worship that Sunday, invited whoever wanted to come to discuss it, and six months later after some research, planning and church discussion, we started Out of the Cold. Over the years, that meal became one of those third places sociologists speak of – a space that was a hybrid of both private and public – wherein relationships of trust and friendship can develop, overcoming suspicion and isolation (See Ray Oldenberg, 2001).

While we were developing these practices of mutual hospitality with strangers, we were also facing our own dysfunctions and conflicts as a church as we sought to form relationships of trust and risk. Israel Galindo, in his study of congregations that experienced renewal found that on average it took ten years to move from a place of disconnection and decline to reconnection and renewal (Galindo, 2007). In our decade of renewal, part of what we were learning is how to discuss difficult issues and work towards reconciliation. Indeed, this would become one of four trajectories I identified that we moved along: from confronting idolatry towards confession and repentance, towards deeper life in Christ (See Dickau, 2010, pp.). Forming long-lasting Christian communities requires ongoing transformation.

4.2. The Next Ten Years: Justice for the Least

Our practice of welcoming the poor and vulnerable grew substantially in the next decade, aided by the establishment and mission of Salsbury Community Society. Salsbury began when a group of people looked at forming a community and buying a local senior's home with the help of a foundation. When the city required seismic upgrading, the financial viability of that project fell through. After that let-down, we met together to grieve that loss, only to meet with someone who imparted a vision of cluster housing to us. This is where people form small communities in houses in geographical proximity to one another. We began with the two houses adjacent to our church building and Salsbury community society was formed. Over the next 20 years, many others observed, participated in and then took up this vision of community living.

Currently, many people from our church live in community houses, some rented, some owned, in geographical proximity to one another, where people share life together and seek to live hospitably. While part of this community living vision is driven by economics, it is also motivated by a vision to develop a thicker shared life together in a culture of individualism and loneliness. To develop this thicker shared life, most folks who did not live in a shared home participated in a home-based group. In this shared life, we took up practices of contemplation, *lectio divina*, listening prayer, storytelling, care, confession and forgiveness. These practices, all of which were taught and explored in our corporate worship on Sundays, served to slowly transform us into different people.

During this next decade, we also developed a host of initiatives aimed primarily at welcoming and empowering the poor, including the following:

4.2.1. Kinbrace

Two houses where the bedrooms are always filled are at Kinbrace. Kinbrace is two houses side by side with 10 suites where refugee claimants making a claim for protection within our borders are welcomed to live until after the outcome of their refugee claim, with an average stay of six months.

The two-decade long story of Kinbrace also illustrates how persisting in these efforts can lead us to participate in systemic change. The staff at Kinbrace saw gaps in the refugee system, including a poorly written government guide and a lack of preparation for their refugee court hearing. To address these gaps, Kinbrace staff developed their own guide and worked with the Law society to develop Ready Tours that give refugee claimants an opportunity to see the

courtroom and talk with a refugee judge about the process. This guide has now become the official government guide and these Ready Tours have been duplicated in eight major cities across the country.

4.2.2. Justwork

Prompted by the desire to share our economic resources and support those who were without sufficient employment, a small group of church members launched Justwork. After a couple years of limited success in finding people jobs and helping people start businesses, we shifted our focus to developing social enterprises. Social enterprises allow people to find a work environment that fits them, whether that is piecework with a flexible schedule or part-time work with an empathetic supervisor. Over a five year period, we developed a pottery business (JustPotters) in the basement of our church building, a catering business started out of our church kitchen (JustCatering) and a renovation business – all of which relied upon office space in the church to reduce costs. Empowering people to overcome physical and mental barriers to employment affirms the God given dignity and creativity that each person holds as bearers of God's image.

4.2.3. East Side Story Guild

We started East Side Story Guild to renew our children's discipleship and to respond to a reduction in funding for the arts in our local primary and elementary schools. During those two and a half hours every Friday, children learn stories from the Bible and explore them creatively though various mediums of art, such as hip-hop, rap, drama, and black light. The children and teens present these stories twice a year during Advent and Easter. One high school principal described the dramatic offerings as the "most creative presentations" she had "ever seen by teens and children." Over the years, East Side Story Guild presentations have shaped the imagination of our neighbours, who have come to participate in these worship events because their children or friends' children were involved, or they had simply heard that the high-quality presentations would be engaging. In this sense, East Side Story Guild presentations have been one of our most evangelistic endeavors, a highly creative way of explaining what sorts of actions God is up to in the world and among our community.

4.2.4. Stillpointe

The practice of prayer in various forms has been augmented by creating spaces

specifically for this practice, including the ground level suite in one house and a garage in another yard – both within five blocks of the church building. At Stillpointe, this ground-level space for prayer and retreat, members of our community have met at 6:30 for over twenty years. Such practices of prayer have become places of healing, dreaming of the kingdom, and building bonds of trust in both God and each other.

Chapter 5

The Last Decade

In my last decade of serving as a pastor from 2010-2020, our longer-term way of living resulted in a wider pursuit of justice for our neigbhorhood (Dickau 2010). Evidence of this move towards systemic change can be observed in three projects.

5.1. Co:Here Housing Project

In 2018, following many twists and turns, the construction of the twenty-six-unit Co:Here housing project was finally completed. Designed to foster shared living, this housing project features a ground floor of community space with a kitchen, living room, dining room, guest room, and community gardens. Every five of the independent suites shares a common living space as well. Like the church congregation itself which at one point had people from 34 different countries of origin and diverse ethnic leadership (Dickau 2010), the community of people who live side-by-side in Co:Here spans a wide spectrum of age, ethnicity, and income. The Co:Here model could serve as a paradigm for other church communities. There is a lot of under-utilized land in church parking lots, and though underground parking used to be cost-prohibitive, it's now much more viable to take an existing parking lot, build social housing on top and retain underground parking for the church. Churches in high-demand areas are going to get ongoing private pressure either to sell or develop their under-utilized land.

5.2. Pursuing Reconciliation with First Nations

Our community has also sought justice around systemic issues during a year-long preparation for and participation in Canada's 2016 Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The congregations of our church eventually focused on the over-representation of indigenous women in Canadian prisons as an issue to engage further.

5.3. Responses to Climate Change

To seek the welfare of our neighbourhood and greater sustainability for the entire planet, we have attempted to develop a more local way of life and rebuild our local economies. Such efforts, which all limit our collective fuel consumption, have included shopping, living, and recreating locally, participating in farmer's markets, developing relationships with farmers for cooperative organic food buying, urban gardening agriculture, keeping chickens and bees, as well as educating the community about local food production. Many in our community have also intentionally moved into the neighbourhood or decided to share homes with others. Building a local way of life has also included sharing tools, vehicles, and equipment, as well as choosing to bike, walk, or buy a hybrid car. We have also protested pipelines and fossil fuel use, even to the point of being arrested.

5.4. Burnout

Participating in the mission of God in this way flows out of a life lived in solidarity with others. It is an important corrective to the distortions of racism and control of people and lands. So many of these moves for justice stemmed from our inhabiting a place while developing a thicker, more porous life together with our neighbours. We learned some hard lessons, however, in this last decade about the cost of this more intense way of life. Although we had named the importance of the practice of Sabbath five years earlier, some of us, including myself, failed to heed this important practice for long-term living out of a gospel vision. We needed time to recover.

Chapter 6

The Promise of a Renewed Monasticism

The term "new monasticism" was initially coined in 1998 by my friend and doctoral supervisor Jonathan Wilson. In *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World (2007)*, Wilson draws on the insights of Alisdair MacIntyre (1998) to explore some of the weakening markers of Western culture. These markers include a fragmentation of our worldview, a lack of both historical identity as well as a future telos or goal, a retreat to the therapeutic in our personal lives, and an over-reliance on management in our leadership roles. In response to these distortions, Wilson calls for a new monasticism that will resist the misshaping forces of our secular culture by taking up practices that have usually been associated with monasticism. Noting the decline of local communities that can help sustain such a disciplined moral life, Wilson also quotes MacIntyre, who ended his book *After Virtue* by voicing a longing for another St. Benedict - someone who could lead another renewal of morality and civility through community" (2007, p. 68, citing McIntyre, 1998, p. 213).

In 2004, Jonathan Wilson Hartgrove pulled together people pursuing this type of vision and together they identified "12 marks of new monasticism" (2008). These included practices such as relocating to the abandoned places of Empire (the margins of society, sharing economic resources, extending hospitality to strangers, lamenting racial divisions, intentionally being formed within community, creation care and reconciliation.

All twelve of these marks had been pursued and practiced in some way or another at Grandview over the previous two decades. Though we did not set out to become a "new monastic" church, we along with many others analyzed the powers and malformations in our culture and sought to respond to those forces in ways that were shaped by a vision of God's shalom. To put this another way, we were searching for ways that we could faithfully be the church amidst the particularities of our secular age. As monasticism has sustained the church through transitional and chaotic times by forming and fostering a stable culture of contrast, I believe that these new forms of monasticism woven into the daily

rhythms of people's lives can have a similar impact upon churches and society.

For the Grandview community, the following three features of monastic practices have been particularly compelling. First, monasticism recognizes that we cannot merely *think* our way towards right action. Rather, we need to take up practices that will reshape our desires, form Christlike habits in our daily lives and cultivate virtues within us. Second, we need others to commit to participate with us if we are going to sustain these practices and habits. When we do not feel like praying, forgiving, seeking justice, or caring for the creation, it is immensely encouraging to have others support us, hold us to account and walk this road alongside us. Third, smaller, local communities tend to be nimbler and more adaptable because they are more connected to their neighbours, and so they can be more responsive to their immediate needs and less inclined to have inhibiting bureaucratic procedures. Such adaptability of smaller and more local communities became especially apparent during the ongoing season of COVID-19 restrictions.

While the twelve markers of new monasticism overlap with the traditional monastic vows of celibacy, poverty and obedience among communities such as the Benedictines, Cistercians and Franciscans, leadership in new monastic communities tends to be communal rather than hierarchical. A flatter leadership structure obviously has both strengths and weaknesses. Many new monastic communities are struggling to figure out how authority functions within their communities, and many also lack accountability to a larger governing body. This feature had been in place for older monastic communities. In our case, having these communities at the center of a church's overall vision has invited both an accountability to external authority, and been especially valuable when a house was in conflict.

6.1. Two Suggested Adjustments for New Monasticism

6.1.1. Longer-term Perspective and Vision

In our story, the practice of stability has been essential to long-range community development and our pursuit of systemic change. Our personal decision to stay longer-term inspired others to make similar commitments and to stem the tide of departure from the neighbourhood. I find that churches and denominations tend to operate with the accelerated pace and planning endemic to society at large (Rosa 2021). In this regard, I have observed the longevity of older monastic communities empowers them to envision long-term projects and plans. For example, whilst in retreat at the Ignatius Jesuit Center outside of Guelph,

Ontario, I learned how they had devised a five-hundred-year plan to cultivate an old growth forest to revitalize the land and forests on the five hundred acres surrounding their retreat center. It is difficult to imagine most new monastic communities which often struggle to plan beyond a year or two taking on projects with such a vast scope. Yet churches wanting to embrace a new monastic vision would do well to have a longer purview.

6.1.2. Wider Engagement with Systemic Issues

The emergence of these new monastic communities throughout the Western world, and among the poor in the majority world, has provided an avenue for living out a life of commitment to Christ and a source of hope for many, especially for those disgruntled with attractional churches that generally do not cultivate a thicker communal life. This hope was in evidence among the new monastic groups we gathered in 2015 from Australia, Canada and the United States. We were especially encouraged by how these communities were woven into rhythms of daily living among both singles and families. However, we also recognized that if the numerous new monastic communities popping up around us were going to have a lasting impact, they would need to move beyond the "isn't this a cool life we are forming together" phase towards more of an institutional life rooted in the church, and seek to address the issues of injustice within their own neighbourhoods – much like older forms of monasticism!

If these new monastic communities can navigate the weaving of these common practices into daily rhythms of living alongside a longer-term engagement and response to systemic issues facing our world, such as the climate emergency and inequality, they have the potential to respond to what Harmut Rosa has described as the "uncontrollability" of the world (2020). Rosa identifies both how the days of trying to control with modernist solutions are fading while at the same time, the engagement with this uncontrollability or resonance is an enduring and inspiring source of meaning and vitality.

Conclusion

If churches and or Christian communities are once again to be the salt and light of their neighbourhoods, we will need to take formation more seriously. This formation will not come about merely through better thinking, or by maintaining worshipping communities, but through a robust combination of practices that lead us towards God, our church community, our neighbours and the physical places we inhabit. These practices will stretch us to form re-shaped communities that are learning anew how to love God, our neighbour and our places in a secular age. These practices alongside curious theological detective work may also lead us to discern the ways of the Spirit in the unknown and uncontrollable cultural transitions we now face.

In this way, a new monasticism will seek to foster the type of practices that can lead us to collaborate with the work of the Spirit towards transformation.   The gift of new monastic practices is that they put us in a learning and engaging posture, one that can foster renewed humility and hope. Indeed, as Covid has exposed and accelerated the inadequacy and demise of previous models, these practices point us both backwards and forwards: backwards to the sustaining and renewing role monasticism has held through the history of the Church; and forwards towards learning how to form a thicker shared life and deeper engagement in place. New monasticism thus offers, not a "solution" to the decline of churches today, but rather a pathway to rediscover the reality of the living God who is everywhere at work, and who "makes all things new". (Rev. 21:5)

Questions for Further Consideration

1. *Where do you see evidence of the secular movements Taylor describes? In your city? In your church? In yourself?*

2. *How do these misshaping powers manifest themselves in your culture? How is your church seeking – or not seeking – to respond to them?*

3. *How might your church be more intentional about personal and communal formation in Christ? What practices might augment this formation?*

4. *How are you forming a thicker shared life in your church? How might you include neighbours or workmates into that shared life?*

5. *What about New Monasticism to you find most intriguing, helpful, or incomplete?*

6. *How is your church responding to systemic injustices? How might you build "muscle" to participate with the Spirit in seeking justice and shalom as a church?*

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To understand how we have moved from a collective to more of an individual identity, see Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Harvard University Press, 1989).

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For a fuller description of the trajectories and practices that Grandview church pursued, see Tim Dickau's two books listed below: *Plunging into the Kingdom Way* (Eugene. Wipf and Stock, 2011); and *Forming Christian Communities in a Secular Age* (Toronto, Tyndale, Academic, 2021).

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