

Downtown & The West End (January 21, 2016)

15 people from 12 out of 33 congregations/organizations (36% representation)

WHAT IS GOD DOING?

Mentally survey your neighbourhood, select what you sense is the single most hopeful sign of God's activity, and write down as much detail about that sign of hope as you can. The sign of hope may be something God is doing through your congregation or ministry, or through someone else's. The sign may even be something God is doing through a secular organization, local business or group of neighbours (God often works ahead of his people and outside the institutional church); and you think the Christian community should join in or do likewise.

- First Baptist's Tuesday Night Meal and Shelter Program: many students, long-time members, my son, the neighbourhood [as volunteers] and the homeless; provides food, prayer, conversation, safety, a witness to the broader community. God loves those on the margins, on the bottom of the social ladder. Such disparate groups, and other organizations in the city, connecting. Many have stepped out of addictions, have new relationships, equalizing friendships; some have become volunteers or even work for the church.
- There is greater and growing interaction among church leaders, if not their churches. I see this in individual examples, such as Darrell Johnson [former pastor of First Baptist] being invited by Peter Elliot [Christ Church Cathedral] to preach on the first Sunday of Advent 2015 – and being well received. I see it in the way First Baptist and Coastal Church are coming together on an annual basis to celebrate Good Friday together. I see it in various recent interdenominational events, such as More Than Gold [2010 Winter Olympics], and the Truth & Reconciliation Commission gatherings last year, the Metro Vancouver Alliance, and Voices Together. I see it in the desire (as yet unfulfilled) to start a successor organization to More Than Gold. I see it too in an awareness that we are not strong enough to stand alone; we need each other.
- context: the downtown financial district. Men I disciple are using their business skills to serve the poor (hot breakfast program in inner city schools, Lazarus House [third stage recovery for men], More Than A Roof Housing Society, etc.). Men are comfortable engaging with unchurched colleagues and friends (vs. a holy huddle) – being salt and light. A pleasing unity between Christian churches. Meet Up groups are attracting seekers interested in significant conversations, versus social isolation. Wider trends in Vancouver: increased racial harmony, integration; increased sensitivity to earth stewardship.
- Taking the Truth & Reconciliation Commission's calls to action seriously.
 - joint gatherings of downtown churches in Summer 2015
 - Christ Church Cathedral making education a focus into 2016 through events and engagement with local elders and partnership with community groups
 - Bill Reid Gallery is looking to partner with the churches in order to highlight this issue in discussion, art, music, etc., over the next year
 - seeing recognition amongst *many* stakeholders that the time *now* to engage, and to respond to the calls to action and figure out what reconciliation looks like
 - illustrates the idea that in Christ all things are reconciled (Colossians) and the beauty, integrity and brokenness of a people who need each other in order to find healing

- I see this as a starting point not only for reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous folks, but also as a way to start practicing reconciliation along the multiple other lines that serve to divide us.
- Being part of a “wider work.” Often, when I’m leaving First Baptist late in the evening after a rehearsal or event, I’ll notice that the doors across the street at St Andrews Wesley United are also open, with people now spilling out of both buildings. It is always a lovely and encouraging image: light and warmth and togetherness in the midst of a dark evening; a reminder that there are people gathering and dispersing all over the city – i.e., God is at work in more ways in Vancouver than just what I can see and am aware of One particular moment was Christmas Eve, about 12:30am, after three services (and a potentially guilt-ridden evening that my husband and children were home and I was not) and when I pulled out of the parking lot feeling both the glow and warmth of having just celebrated Christmas Eve in such a lovely way AND the frustration and uncertainty about the personal toll of this line of work, AND there it was again. Our sisters and brothers ALSO celebrating, my colleagues both at FBC and all the city figuring it out too. This is all made more clear by our cooperation on the marking of the end of the Truth & Reconciliation Commission with an Ecumenical Worship and Prayer Service on May 31, 2015.
- response to the Refugee Crisis – sponsorship etc., time, money, deep concern
- at St Andrews Wesley United
 - candlelight and music worship service on Sunday evenings has about 75 coming now and is growing – there is hunger for prayer, space, beauty, stillness
 - Jazz Vespers has 100-150 attending, with a growing response
 - Word is Out – spiritual connection, socialization and discussion, for the LGBTQ community twice per month
 - i.e., new ways of sharing the word
 - care for children / families / parents – more families are raising children downtown; Parents + Tots Drop In once a week has 50+ little kids and is offered as a ‘no-strings-attached’ service; parenting courses offered two or three times per semester
 - End Homelessness Now committee for a while was here, holding mayoralty debates; First Baptist’s Out of the Cold program
- The Catholic Men’s Hostel at 150 Robson. It has 106 regular beds and 20 bad weather sleeping mats. It’s been operating for over 60 years. What is heart warming is the respect each client is offered and the many levels of practical help possible. The staff are generous with extra time they put in at the hostel beyond working hours. At Christmas a huge response came in to the call for warm, good clothing and toiletries. In addition to offering a warm, safe bed and food, there is the invitation to join in prayer and supportive dialogue.
- My “neighbourhood” is Vancouver as a whole. There is quite a lot of church-planting activity, as a number of different groups/teams/denominations have moved to Vancouver for the express purpose of fulfilling the Great Commission in a Vancouver context. Our church plant held its first public meeting in February 2012 and is growing despite many challenges – many have come with great challenges to deal with. There is a Vineyard team that moved here last summer with intentions to plant. It shows God is working in people’s hearts, stirring them to come specifically to Vancouver to bring the good news and Jesus to this city. It shows God’s great love for this city, and it shows that God has many people in this city (of God, according to Paul in Corinth). People who have never heard the gospel nor encountered Jesus are now hearing the gospel and encountering Jesus. Some “plants” have failed, but God keeps bringing people to Vancouver for Vancouver. God is moving in this city.
- Growth in the number of churches and cooperation. Twenty-two years ago there was very little new growth or unity. It is a sign to the city that we are one. It removes a major

stumbling block for the unchurched. One example is the joint Good Friday Service (between Coastal and First Baptist); another is the Alpha Course being used in a variety of churches. Family unity is much more attractive to an “outsider” than a family that is at odds. I see the missional nature of God as people have arrived from other countries to church plant. It is answer to the Lord’s Prayer. It reflects the diversity in the Body of Christ.

- I am in my fourth month of living in Vancouver, and since arriving I have seen God working through the openness in relationships and ideas that people foster here. I have had numerous and repeated conversations with people who do not claim to follow Jesus yet are willing to hear my experience of knowing and following him. They are also free to share about their own convictions and beliefs. This stands out strongly for me because I expected a degree of intolerance or impatience at the mention of Jesus. This has not been the case. For me, I find myself revisiting the typically cultural evangelical “reflex” to call people to a decision about Christ. I am trusting that as people enter into relationship with me, allow me to share about Jesus, and continue inviting me into their lives, that God will perform the necessary heart work. I feel that this sign of hope, this interest that people have on spiritual matters must not be abused, but still be faithfully expressed through ongoing relationships.
- Primarily through connectedness/community. Seen through the desire of people to find community and connection in an increasingly disconnected world (though highly connected by technology, people seem to be increasingly lonely and disconnected from fulfilling community). We are seeing signs of this in our community at large through people finding one another in parks, Meet Up groups, etc. In a church context, we are seeing people looking for community and meaningful relationship as a first step to salvation. The Alpha Course has been particularly useful for us at Trinity Central, and we’ve seen fruit because of its relational focus. From a hope perspective, we see
 - a recognition in society of people’s need for community
 - salvation in the context of Alpha
 - numbers of churches being planted and new campuses started – all connection points for people to come into community where they can encounter God.
- There is evidence of a sense of community in the West End reflected in the interaction between community groups and agencies and between shops and their customers. The community gardens and the street markets bring people together from across the neighbourhood. People talk to one another, engage with one another, and gather together in community activities. The Village, Denman Street, Stanley Park and the range of events that take place in this neighbourhood over the course of the year and most notably in the summer: the various races, Gay Pride Parade, the fireworks competition. The summer witnesses a swelling of the population drawn from visitors, the cruise ships, and from the suburbs. In many respects the West End is the public face of Vancouver for outsiders. There are also community centres and agencies that cater especially to the needs of the large number of seniors in the neighbourhood: Gordon Neighbourhood House, Barclay Manor, The West End Seniors’ Centre, the West End Community Centre, the Library. The West End churches collaborate as well in meeting the needs of the homeless, the downtrodden, those needing social assistance and public advocacy. Several churches offer or are in the process of offering low income housing to residents. This sense of public service and consciousness represents the work of God in our midst, in its many forms, and often from unexpected sources. Jesus said: Love God and love your neighbour. The neighbourhood churches offer resources for public worship; other agencies work with those seeking spiritual comfort in other ways such as the St Paul’s Labyrinth. Volunteerism is the outward sign of love for neighbour and so are the various services and agencies that seek to ameliorate the loneliness, the deprivation, the hopelessness that many do experience in our neighbourhood. God draws humanity into relationships of different kinds – marriage, family, friends, associates, communities. We strive to give this relationship meaning and connection through the love of God. But it

doesn't always mean that all are drawn to this relationship; and it is those outside that we also must serve through the love of God.

- Our local public school has a Kids Helping Kids Club, under the supervision of the Vice Principal. They make plans for how to make school better. Recently, this student-run group decided that they wanted to give the proceeds from a Movie Night and Bake Sale to the Syrian refugee families that are coming into our neighbourhood. Normally, these fundraisers go towards benefitting the school and the students. Not so this year – instead, it goes to families in need. Why does this stand out? Because children are leading us – the Kingdom of Heaven is close to children. The display of sacrificial love by these kids displays the heart of Christ.

WHAT ARE THE SPIRITUAL AND SOCIAL CHALLENGES?

Participants were asked to answer either 1a or 1b and then either 2a or 2b.

1a. What are the main spiritual challenges confronting your neighbourhood? Are these the same as or different from the ones confronting your parishioners or ministry participants?

- The West End is a transient community, which limits long term involvements in parish life for all churches. So many claim to be “spiritual” and not religious. An indication of that are the large number of walkers attending our Labyrinth, few of whom have any church connection. These two communities – the one traditional and church-going, and the other “spiritual” and seeking alternatives – rarely seem to connect even in St Paul’s where there is a vibrant Labyrinth community. At our parish church efforts are being made to interest our own parishioners in an activity more popular with the non-religious but which has merits for those in the Christian community seeking out closer spiritual connections with God.
- marketplace: hubris, self-sufficiency. “What could I possibly need from your Jesus? Christianity historically only foments prejudice, guilt, and hypocrisy.” The challenge is to overcome the resistance that comes from a proud heart and a very affluent, active, busy lifestyle. Mark 4:19
- busy-ness
- loneliness / isolation (x2) as identified by City [Vancouver Foundation 2012] Survey
- uncertainty about engaging / serving
- There is a lack of unconditional love, whether on the part of Christians or non-Christians. Relationships are clouded by prejudice and maybe even fear. The wider community is suspicious of evangelicals, but this is due to ignorance and stereotypes. And yes maybe some of the suspicion is justified.
- spiritual hunger – distrust of traditional language / styles
- Vancouver identified as the most secular part of North America, so how to make connections with the Gospel, real communication
- lack of love and empathy
- despair: sense of powerlessness in the face of overwhelming social issues such as homelessness, mental illness, addiction; So there is a vacuum that is filled by drug dealers, human smugglers etc; lack of faith in God’s power and willingness to change and heal people and the city.

1b. St Paul says “our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against ... the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12). What spiritual forces especially mark your neighbourhood? Which ones threaten your people? If this language is foreign to you, replace “spiritual forces” with “idols.”

- idols of career advancement, relationship, wealth (money), cult of personality, body image, popularity, health/dieting/fitness; filling the deep hunger for significance, meaning, purpose, and love with anything and everything but God
- fear, which translates to greed, rejection, fear of missing out, fear of failure, confusion and isolation
- there are so many, but ...
 - loneliness ... generally, and among seniors, among gay seniors
 - But loneliness isn't just about individuals. It is a social issue. It is a justice issue.
- Pre-occupation with self and lifestyle, where maintaining the desired lifestyle, the perfect body, wealth, draws us into worshipping ourselves. A society which is spiritually 'open' but not to Jesus. At the root, our exalting of self, and a rejection of God.
- Individualism that manifests itself in actions of what is often damaging freedom.

2a. What is the most damaging social injustice impacting your neighbourhood? What are its main effects? In what ways, if any, does it affect people in your church or ministry?

- Homelessness and mental illness are the most visible signs of a failure within our community. The strain of government agencies and even our own Advocacy Office & Outreach program is an indication of the seriousness of this problem. Loneliness and a disconnect among so many from the larger community.
- Homelessness and mental illness are the most visible signs of failure within the community. Loneliness and disconnection from the larger community.
- addiction and hopelessness
- Hidden poverty – primarily related to the cost of living in our city, whether tied to housing/renting, or the cost of food, etc. Particularly true of single parent families and lower income workers, or non-English-as-first-language foreign workers who are doing more menial work. It's a question of making it through the month for many of them. Quite likely the lack of available rental properties and the high cost of renting in the downtown core.
- housing costs lead to homelessness, especially for youth and young adults; mental illness/care for the same. Downtown, Coal Harbour, Yaletown have lots of money; Downtown Eastside has little money; the West End is half and half = how to integrate the community?
- exorbitant housing costs
- loneliness and social isolation
- This is my observation and I don't live in the Downtown/West End or attend church here [a researcher/reporter]. Loneliness and social isolation are city-wide and pervasive, but more so in this area because of its proliferation of high-rises. This forces many people to literally live in boxes one on top of another, with almost no social interaction. It is neither sought nor desired. The impact is, for example, high suicide rates.
- Housing affordability. For all. For the street-involved. For the shrinking middle class. Tied to food as well. (But churches could be part of the solution, too, with land resources, etc.)
- Social stratification. Those with ridiculous amounts of cash. And those with not enough. It's an issue of taxation, redistribution of wealth.
- Outreach programs are still very top-down / service-oriented.
- Affordable housing is being affected by high turnover in rental properties, resulting in expensive upgrading and increased rents. This affects the elderly on fixed incomes and drives young people with families away from the neighbourhood.
- Local businesses are closing because of high rents. Results in changing the neighbourhood's vitality. New shops are more expensive.
- socio-economic prejudices ... both to the poor/homeless/immigrant and to the wealthy/home-owning/immigrant. Cause = racism, fear of the 'other', greed/individualism

2b. What is your neighbourhood's greatest wound? Similarly, thinking about your parishioners or ministry participants, what is their greatest wound as a group?

- Today's *Vancouver Sun* points out a serious trend in Vancouver that is more serious here in the West End. Affordable housing is being affected by the high turnover in rental properties and the resultant upgrading and increased rents that follow. Our neighbourhood is transient, which means that the occupancy rate, while not high [vacancy rates are below 1%], certainly does affect rents. We have a fairly significant elderly population here in the West End, and most are on small pensions supplemented by savings. The time will come when the West End, Vancouver's most accessible rental community, will be overpriced. And the city, for its part, caters to the millionaires, allowing new developments like that on Jervis Street to wipe out older properties and replace them with million dollar condos for the rich and privileged. This is a shocking development and one that should be openly condemned as irresponsible. And they will continue to allow expensive developments to encircle the West End like a palisade around an otherwise livable neighbourhood.
- broken/fractured families; fatherless homes or broken relationship with fathers. This affects our people in their sense of identity, security, and intimacy with Family and God.
- Vancouver Foundation's 2011 study revealed that pervasive loneliness and disconnectedness are Vancouver's #1 problem – why? How did this happen? Greed. Perhaps individualism as the air we breath, our propensity towards distraction, our fear of failed relationships. We are told that life is all about us – we take that to heart and we discover that we are disconnected and alone. So we medicate that loneliness in damaging ways.
- P., who is a homeless bottle collector: lack of proper care for a seriously addicted individual; 3 week wait for a detox program with medications; this is problematic because while one day "X" may be ready to go in, by the time 3 weeks rolls around he is likely not willing anymore or able to because he's drunk/stoned.
- in general, a lack of proper care for many people with varying forms of mental illness and/or substance addiction, resulting in chronic "homelessness"
- (central business district) pride, self-sufficiency, hubris. Symptoms: relationship carnage, unforgiveness, exploitation guilt