Books

A different city. A different church plant

Mark Whittall: *ReInvention: Stories from an Urban Church*. Wood Lake Books 2015, 158 pages.

Reviewed by Harvey Shepherd

Midway through a meditation on the Cross during last year's Good Friday service, there was a loud noise at the back of St. Albans Church in downtown Ottawa.

"A man banged his way noisily through our doors with his bicycle, shouting, 'I want a peanut butter sandwich," recalls Mark Whittall, who had taken on the challenge in 2011 of seeking to preside over the revival of the parish as its priest. Up to then, Holy Week worship has exemplified what the parish was trying to achieve – and it continued to do so.

The services wove together traditional Anglican liturgy and Bible readings from the official Lectionary with innovations such as a dramatic reading of the Passion narrative from the Gospel of Luke and a song by Leonard Cohen. And even when things went off script on Good Friday, the parish took the incident in its stride.

The sandwich seeker was looking for Centre 454, a day program in the basement serving the homeless. The centre was closed for the holiday. Someone went to the back of the church to welcome the newcomer but the man headed down a set of stairs toward the drop-in centre. The door to the centre should have been locked but wasn't. An alarm went off. However, the church's versatile music director managed to disarm the alarm, show the man to the washroom and persuade him to leave with his bicycle. The music director was back in time to lead the next song.

Whittall recounts the incident in his book, *ReInvention: Stories from an Urban Church,* of which copies were on hand when he spoke in March at the Montreal Diocesan Theological College and at a meeting of the Montreal Diocesan Council. At least at the latter event (at which I was present) he was dutifully at pains to stress that the "church plant" at St. Albans was a unique event, not a pattern for any other.

Still, notwithstanding Whittall's delicacy, it is obviously not just a coincidence that he was invited to Montreal, to present what seems to be quite a success story, as the Montreal diocese launches its own "plant." The "St. James Plant" is also in a venerable downtown church, known for the last century and a half as St. James the Apostle – just a tad older than St. Albans, the second-oldest church in Ottawa. Those who invited Whittall to speak in Montreal no doubt hoped his story would be an inspiration, and you can't help seeking to compare and contrast.

Some similarities are obvious enough. In each case, a vibrant Anglican community (if all goes well in Montreal) will be the successor to a venerable Anglican parish that existed for around a century and a half in about the same building under almost the same name.

There are apparently some church plant enthusiasts who would look down their noses at the idea of calling such an endeavour a church plant at all. They would argue that a true plant begins in someone's home, a rented storefront, and active or disused commercial movie theatre or something like that. But such a cavil would not carry much weight with the Rev. Graham Singh, rector of the "St. James Plant," or with the movement centred at Holy Trinity Brompton Church in London, England, and now including "plants" at 30 or so churches, with the St. James Plant as the latest iteration. Most of these are in England in churches that were already Anglican; one exception is a non-denominational plant in a former United Church in Guelph, Ont., Singh's home town, where he was the minister just before coming to Montreal. In fact he and an organization of which he is executive director, Church Planting Canada, feel a special vocation for reclaiming church buildings more or less abandoned or at least underused.

Actually, the site of the Ottawa plant was more definitely vacant than was St. James the Apostle. The previous congregation and priest at St. Albans had left the Diocese of Ottawa because of a disagreement over same-sex blessings, whereas St. James the Apostle was an active and in some respects vibrant congregation right up to the transition, although in financial distress.

Centre 454 – the drop-in centre that the man with the bicycle looking for – provides an interesting point of comparison between the two church plants. It was the Diocese of Ottawa that decided to relocate the centre in the basement of the then-vacant St. Albans and then tasked Whittall, at the time a priest of another Ottawa parish, with overseeing the development of a "new St. Albans" on the main floor.

The St. James plant also has a drop-in centre for the homeless in its basement, sort of. The St. James Drop-In Centre, an autonomous non-denominational outreach, rents the space it occupies, not exactly in the church basement, but the basement of the church hall. That arrangement is a legacy of the former St. James the Apostle, although the drop-in centre and other outreach ministries in the parish are now tenants of the Diocese of Montreal. It remains to be seen, I suppose, how the relationship between the St. James Plant and the St. James Drop-In Centre will evolve.

Two drop-in centres

Centre 454 is a diocesan venture, but no ambiguity about Whittall's commitment and that of his parish to the drop-in centre and to social justice is evident from his book.

"It's important for a church community to seek to incarnate itself in its local area. We didn't want St. Albans to be a drive-in church; we wanted to be a church that was rooted in the neighbourhood, a parish church in the true sense of the word…

"It didn't take long to figure out that social justice was going to be one of our priorities. With a day program for people who are homeless in our basement and some of the city's most vulnerable on our doorstep, service to the poor and marginalized was a big part of who we wanted to become. As one of our planning team put it, 'social justice is in our DNA.' But we wanted to be more than just another social service agency. We wanted our service and our thirst for social justice to be an expression of who we were as followers of Jesus."

I was pleasantly surprised that the arts are as high a priority as the book makes it seem for Whittall and the new St. Albans. This evidently reflects his personal preferences, but also what he regards as the remarkable assets of the St. Albans building and close attention to what was known about the physical needs of the local arts community.

The first play staged at the new St. Albans was a production by a group called the 9th Hour Theatre Company of *Freud's Last Session*, an off-Broadway hit that dramatizes an imagined encounter between C.S. Lewis and Sigmund Freud on the eve of the Second World War.

Freud play was a hit

"*Freud's Last Session* was a great success. We even turned a small profit! More important, we were able to assemble a diverse audience of St. Albans folk, atheists, theatre types and people from other churches to hear C.S. Lewis and Sigmund Freud engage in an entertaining debate between the spiritual and scientific materialist world views. Perhaps the highlight was when the two actors came out after the show for a talk-back session, allowing all of us to keep the conversation going. It was exactly the sort of thing we were hoping for when we first envisioned St. Albans as a centre for the arts."

There may not be as much need for yet another arts venue in Montreal as there was in our nation's capital; here as always, it seems, St. Albans responded to the local community. Unlike the Montreal church planters, who set great store by the expertise of the people at Holy Trinity Brompton, Whittall and his associates in the Diocese of Ottawa made a lot of stuff up as they went along. And even then, they also trusted to their own associates in the venture.

"This is a unique opportunity," he quotes himself as saying to a small and mixed group in the early days. "We, as the Anglican Church of Canada, haven't started a new congregation in downtown Ottawa for at least a generation This is exciting, and it's an opportunity to do something new. But I don't want to tell you what sort of church you want. For too long, our usual way of doing things is to have a certain form and type of church, and then to let the shape of church determine what sort of ministry we do. I'd like to suggest that we flip things around. Let's start by trying to figure out what sort of mission and ministry God is calling us to in this time and place, and then we'll let that shape the kind of church that we're called to be."

That approach probably fits in well with what he, following the

Mark Whittall speaks to Diocesan Council in March.

Montreal philosopher Charles Taylor, calls an Age of Authenticity.

Whittall writes: "Religion is not disappearing in North America. Churches, mosques, synagogues and temples are not going away, and faith and spirituality will continue to be important for large numbers of Canadians and Americans. But we are living in a changed context. We are living in an age in which duty and authority have given way to freedom and authenticity, in which deference has been replaced by discernment. We are living in an age in which spirituality is a quest that isn't necessarily embodied in a religious institution, and potential involvement in these institutions will be evaluated to determine whether it is indeed worthwhile in the context of how one's own faith journey is understood. We are living in an age in which the context for belief has changed. Belief in God is no longer axiomatic, and because there are alternatives, even those who *do* believe do so in a context of doubt and uncertainty. This has a critical impact on the lived experience of faith. We are living in an age in which churches that have been shaped and dominated by pre-boomers are going to have to respond to the questions and needs of post-boomers, or they will disappear."

Sunday school kids at Christ Church Beaurepaire made tie-dyed T-shirts for themselves, and one for Archdeacon Michael Johnson to honour him on his retirement.

Book on residential schools is still topical for Anglicans

John S. Milloy: *A National Crime: The Canadian Government and the Residential School System, 1879 to 1986.* University of Manitoba Press, 1999, 424 pages.

Reviewed by Michael Johnson and Nancy Chapple

The Ven. Michael Johnson recently retired as incumbent of Christ Church Beaurepaire and announced he plans to relocate in London, Ont., and explore new opportunities in life with his partner, Nancy Chapple. Although the book was published in 1999, Archdeacon Johnson said in a note to the editor that a review seems timely in that the focus of Montreal diocesan synod in June is Anglicans' relationship with native peoples and the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

This book is not an easy read. The sentence style alone, loaded as it is with names and dates, could be enough to put a reader off. But what makes it really tough slogging is the graphic content, the repeated, detailed descriptions of the life of indigenous children in the school system imposed on them and their families by the government and churches of Canada.

The book begins with an historical perspective of perhaps benign but ill-conceived plans for assimilation of indigenous peoples dating from the beginning of British rule in the North American colonies. The book

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