

Waterloo Campus Ministry - Report to Classis Huron, May 2021
Rev. Brian Bork

It feels a little strange to lead off with loss. Typically, a report like this would tell some stories about the great things that happened in the life of the ministry over the past year. But in a year like this one, how could I not start with loss?

For years now, most of my work on campus has been done with small groups, in small spaces, over food. That's not possible right now, and it hasn't been possible since last March. **Campus is relatively deserted.** I know some graduate students who have lab access, and for them, work life carries on fairly normally. But for most other folks, UW or Laurier haven't been places where they've spent much time at all. A student mentioned to me the other day *"I can't wait until I can walk into the library on campus and check out an actual book to read!"* I really resonate with that kind of longing, a longing for the ordinary ways we used to spend our days on campus. So much is lost when we're all away from the normally bustling, vibrant campus. When campus is full, there's a liveliness that helps nourish and energize the work I do. When campus is full, there's a sacred serendipity that happens when I cross paths with someone I haven't seen in a while. When campus is full, folks have the opportunity to move between spaces - from the classroom to the Chaplains Office, from the library to the campus pub, instead of sitting in front of their computers and switching from one Zoom meeting to another. All of that makes a huge difference in how this ministry actually *happens*.

The loss of "normal" ministry has been a major challenge this year. And while it's good to acknowledge loss, it'd be remiss for me to not also reflect on the ways God has done wonderful things through the ministry this year, in spite of it all. In fact, upon reflection, that seems like the true story of the year: the gift of good things, even in the very context of loss.

Like most of your churches, a good deal of ministry happened over Zoom this year. After a couple attempts to meet outdoors in windy Waterloo Park, the ministry's pub discussion group **Fermented Faith** and faculty fellowship **Breakfast Book Club** gathered regularly online. **Fermented Faith** actually thrived for the better part of the year - some new "regulars" joined us, and some alumni were able to pop in too, even though they now live in Toronto or Drayton or wherever. That was one of the unexpected gifts of Zoom - the borders of campus ministry were expanded. Throughout January, we had over a dozen folks each week at Fermented Faith, which is about the optimal size. And then, in the first week of February, no one showed up. Over the next few weeks folks drifted in, staying for a while, saying things like "I thought about not coming today." **Zoom fatigue is real.** In "normal" times, students would leave their class or their lab, and walk to the pub at Laurier, where there would be good food and a relaxed atmosphere. In our Zoom version of Fermented Faith there's no nachos and no new environment. Just another couple hours on Zoom after a fully day of, well, being on Zoom.

The **Breakfast Book Club** was ambitious, and spent most of the academic year reading Fleming Rutledge's magisterial ***The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ***. It's over 600 pages, but we made it through without it ever being a slog. If you've got the inclination to read a long book, I can't recommend this one enough, as Rutledge does so much to expand upon and articulate a story that we often think we understand so well. One philosophy professor in the group described it as "**profoundly redemptive**" to read - that kind of feedback means a ton to me, as it shows that this ministry can bring something vital to the table for even well-seasoned tenured academics.

Zoom also made **new kinds of collaboration** possible. Along with two of my colleagues, I helped host a **Spiritual Friendship** reading group, with students from Waterloo, Guelph, and Redeemer. We read three books on the subject of spiritual friendship, and used them as a foundation for our own reflections on the joys and complications of our own relationships. This sort of cross-campus fellowship wouldn't really have happened before Zoom became a normal, everyday means of connection.

I was also able to help host the **Waterloo Christian Scholars** group every other week. It's a small graduate student fellowship that gathers for prayer and support. It's a fairly international group, and it's a joy to pray with Christians from around the globe who've come to Waterloo for their research.

I've really enjoyed meeting graduate students this year! I've made strong connections with a dozen or so grad students who I didn't know before September. That's been a lovely confirmation of some discernment I've been doing over the past year. **I've felt a nudge from God that this ministry is well-suited to create a graduate fellowship on campus.** Currently, there's 11 or 12 undergraduate Christian ministries at UW, but there's nothing for graduate students. There should be! And all the students I've spoken with this year have mentioned how much they miss the Christian communities from their undergraduate days. So, I'm hoping that as the weather warms and we can meet outside, there will be some opportunities for more community development among grad students, with the aim of launching something formal in the fall, should campus be open again.

Ministry wasn't completely confined to Zoom. **I've learned a lot about the pastoral value of long walks in the park.** Over the year, I've gotten to know the paths in Waterloo Park and Victoria Park quite well (and the streets of UpTown and Downtown Kitchener, too). It's funny - before the pandemic, I always assumed that I should meet students in my office, or at the campus Starbucks. But conversation and prayer flow in a different way outdoors - there's something powerful about praying Psalm 1 with a student, *lectio divina*-style, under some sturdy trees in the park. I'm going to keep this practice going post-pandemic.

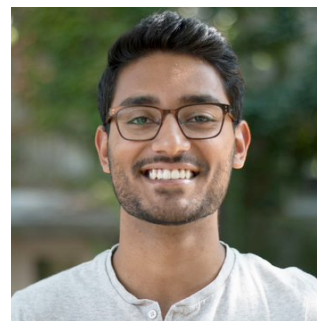
There's much more I could write here, but I think I'll leave it at that for now, and turn over the remainder of the report to four students who've written small reflections on how the ministry has blessed their lives. Their words mean a ton to me, and have helped me see that even in a years such as this, loss doesn't have the final word. God is faithful through lean years and years of plenty. That faithfulness is reflected in Classis Huron's generous support to this ministry over not just this pandemic year, but over **six decades!** It's that long faithfulness that helps make stories like these students' stories possible. For that I thank you, sincerely, and ask that you continue to pray for me and for this campus ministry as it navigates the road ahead.

**Peace,
Rev. Brian Bork**

I first met Brian in my second year at Laurier having recently recommitted my life to Christ. We began by sharing our life stories over coffee and continued to meet once a week on campus to chat about life and theology. It was during these one-on-one's that I experienced incredible growth as we studied several books and prayed together. Early in our relationship I knew I could trust Brian with some of my deepest struggles. As I opened up, I was constantly met with gentle and wise counsel that refreshed me with insight and clarity. With plenty of patience and grace Brian channeled my enthusiasm and passion to foster meaningful change that equipped me as follower of Christ and a shepherd to my peers. It wasn't just the content of our discussion that impacted me but also Brian's style of mentorship that modelled how to approach discipleship in my own life.

Through Brian I was also given the opportunity to attend the *Leadership Studio*, *Fermented Faith*, and *Friday Night Dinners* at his house. Nearly six years after our introduction, we continue to meet online as I journey through pandemic life after graduation.

- **Jaaron Pullenayagem, BA in Business Administration @ Laurier**



Two years ago, I never even considered going to a therapist, much less a chaplain. I thought that all I needed was a good career, a certain special someone, and a band to perform in. What changed? A metaphorical slap in the face by a series of lectures I heard on Genesis. The very old, very strange Bible that's sitting on my family's dinner table wasn't just a dusty footnote of a superstitious, distant past anymore. Now it practically shone with eternal wisdom and truth. I realized that I had a choice to make: to push onward and confronting my demons, or

to just go back with in the familiar world of math, technology, and more math. Somehow, the former wasn't backing down, so that's what I went with.

Much to my dismay, my peers weren't interested in the very same ultimate questions that shook me to the core. But after my multiple conversations with Brian, I came to see that the world was even more incredible than I could imagine. I could bear all this alone, or I could share my thoughts with a group. And so, after I attending a multitude of rich conversations with the *Fermented Faith* gang was just what I needed, and it's been a major part of my discovery of Christianity.

- **Grant Cheng, Math major @ UW**

In the nearly six years that I've been a part of this ministry, I've learned from God, from Brian, from the other chaplains, from my fellow students, and have even been provided the space and opportunity to learn from myself. I've met Christian brothers and sisters I would have never otherwise met, some of whom have now become dear friends with whom I share the intimate highs and lows of life and faith.

I've even been given the opportunity to take on leadership, which has stretched me, grown me, and humbled me all at once, and has been an invaluable experience as I navigate my own calling to pastoral ministry.

I wish I could write you a list of everything I've learned and all the concrete effects this ministry has had on my life, but I can't do that. Just like you probably can't tell me how your best friend has changed and shaped your life, or just how much it means to you to be a part of your church. Some things, and some people, find their ways so deep into our lives that we can't describe them except to say that they are a part of us. That, I think, in many ways is what church is, or at least, what it is meant to be. And that's what this ministry has been to me.

- **Josh Martin, MA of Theology @ UW**

I've known Pastor Brian for quite a few years now. Over the past two and half years-ish of grad school I'm pretty sure I've at least once attended every campus ministry event. However, most regularly I've attended *The Table*, a morning liturgy of the Lord's Supper, and *Friday Night Dinners*, where Pastor Brian hosts people for dinner at his house once a month on Friday. Both of these times have been very meaningful to me. These relatively small gatherings echo what the early church must have been like, sincere community in which Christ was the centre and all are welcome.

Participating in something so ancient yet relatively uncommon is a distinct break from the frantic nature of university. Being a grad student (especially at STEM-focused UW) often involves setting aside considerations of the spiritual world to investigate and explain our natural world. By contrast, *The Table* and *Friday Night Dinners* are joyful reminders that I am not the only Christian in my university community and that the spiritual world is in fact important. Beyond these types of "formal" events, Pastor Brian has also made sure to make the time to have one on one conversations. We have discussed more personal things like the hardship of having most of my undergraduate friends move away, or the seriousness of faith in the face of death. Pastor Brian's welcome perspective consistently reminds me of the presence of God in day to day things and that God's presence should always be considered when meeting life's larger problems. Reflecting on all this now, I think Brian, throughout all his ministry, has presented to me the clearest picture of what it means to be called Pastor.

- **Kyle Langendoen, MMath @ UW**

