

COVID-19, religious freedoms and the Christian response

Have pandemic regulations infringed upon your rights?

BY GISELE MCKNIGHT

The Mission & Outreach team of the Diocese of Fredericton continued its Christian Forum series on Oct. 7 with a most timely topic entitled *COVID-19, Religious Freedoms & Christian Response*.

Dr. Alan Sears, Professor Emeritus in the Faculty of Education at the University of New Brunswick, was the speaker, his second time presenting for the diocesan Christian Forum. Alan's main focus of study and research is citizenship, civic education and the intersection of religion and education.

The forum was presented online, hosted by parish development officer Shawn Branch, with introductions by Nancy Stephens.

To help combat the spread of COVID-19, governments worldwide have imposed stringent measures, including limits to public gatherings like religious worship services. Some have seen these rules as violations of their religious rights, and in response, have protested and even engaged in acts of civil disobedience.

It is this backdrop that forms the context for Alan's presentation. He began with Artur Pawlowski, an Alberta pastor who flaunted pandemic rules, claimed persecution, and compared the Canadian situation to those of Soviet Russia and Nazi-era Germany. He even likened his situation to that of Martin Luther.

Not long after he was in the news, pastors of eight United churches in Saint John wrote the premier asking for tighter restrictions for churches, saying their guiding mission was to love their neighbour — and keep them safe.

"The world is divided," said Alan. "Quite obviously the Christian community is divided too."

HUMAN RIGHTS

Alan spoke on human rights, the threat to those rights and whether Canadian pandemic regulations have infringed upon religious rights.

He gave a history on the evolution of human rights,



PRESENTER ALAN SEARS, parish development officer Shawn Branch, and Nancy Stephens of the Mission & Outreach Committee during the online Christian Forum on Oct. 7.

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which were much aided by the Reformation. Many modern-day human rights focus on freedom of religion, peaceful assembly, thought, belief and association.

"The purpose of rights is to restrain governments, to allow humans to flourish," he said. "But rights have limits and we fight for those limits."

Plural marriage and hate speech are two examples of limits.

"Rights are not absolute," he said. "It's about finding a balance, and that's central to this question about protests during COVID — the balance of things like public safety and religious rights. Rights are limited by the conceptions of the common good."

GOVERNMENTS AND POWER

Alan posed and answered a provocative question: Are governments a threat to human rights, and particularly to the freedom of religion? Absolutely, he said. Governments need to be restrained.

"Governments want power,"

he said. "In times of crisis, they often move to accumulate more power."

For example, when the War Measures Act was invoked during the FLQ crisis in Quebec in 1970, police officers in British Columbia used it to remove American draft dodgers camped at Stanley Park in Vancouver and deposit them back at the border. This had nothing to do with the Quebec issue, but the act allowed them to arrest people without charge — 5,000 km from the kidnappings.

A THREAT TO RELIGION?

But the crux of the presentation was, 'have governments in Canada implemented mandates that threaten or deny religious rights in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.'

"The legal answer is we don't know," he said. "It's too early to tell."

The courts have begun to decide, and will continue to as cases make their way through the judicial system. So far, Pastor Pawlowski was found

guilty, as have others, although appeals are likely.

"I will tell you where I stand," said Alan. "I stand with the judge in this [Pawlowski] case. I do not believe there has been significant abrogation of religious rights during the COVID-19 pandemic."

That's not to say he's impressed with how governments have handled regulations, when churches were closed but Walmarts and the casinos of Las Vegas were open.

However, worship in Canada was not stopped even when churches were closed. They moved to online services and in some cases, expanded their folds.

"No one has told the church what it can and cannot say," he said. "Pastor Pawlowski says he's living in the times like those of the Soviet and Nazi eras. That's simply not true."

"It's not true because I can tell you what Pastor Pawlowski said about his criticism of government because I read it in several newspapers."

"If he'd been living in the

Soviet Union of old or the Nazi era in Germany, he'd never have been allowed to make those statements... and they'd never have been publicized in the press. So I think that's way over the top."

Have governments made mistakes? Yes.

"But there's not been a systematic attempt to limit the religious rights of Christians or any other religious organization."

THE CHRISTIAN ROLE IN DEMOCRACY

Alan quoted Jeremiah to illustrate the role religious people should play in democratic life.

Jeremiah 29:7, in speaking to the exiled Israelites: "Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."

"The Jews hated the city, hated the people and longed for justice, but Jeremiah tells them to settle in and work for

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CHRISTIAN FORUM

Covid-19, Religious freedoms and the Christian response, continued

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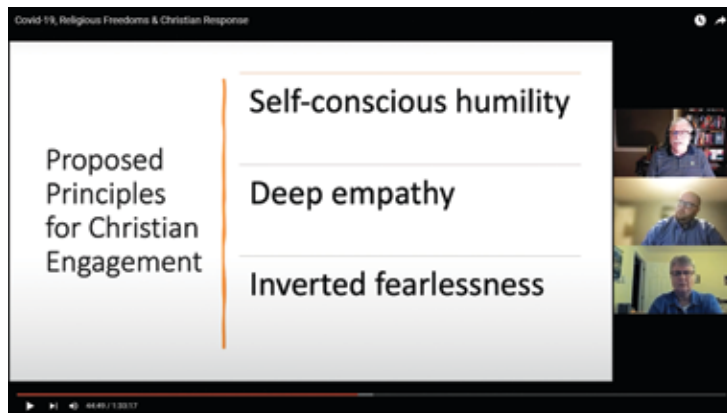
the good of the community,” said Alan. “For me, this call is central to how I want to act as a Christian.”

In a democracy, the groups and agencies that are neither businesses nor government are called civil society organizations, which include religious groups, labour unions, service clubs, professional associations, environmental groups, and NGOs, and they are essential to the good of a functioning democracy.

“I think church and religious organizations have a particularly important role to play,” he said. “They provide an alternative vision of who humans are, and how society ought to be organized. They make an important contribution to life.”

There is much negativity in society, though. The public sphere has become poisoned by ignorance, malice and xenophobia, which is a great challenge, he said.

To combat it, Alan put forth three principles for Chris-



tian engagement in society: self-conscious humility; deep empathy; and inverted fearlessness by rejecting the weaponization of fear.

SELF-CONSCIOUS HUMILITY aims to admit that we might be wrong.

“When we think we know everything, we are dismissive of others,” he said.

If Christians are enraged about the so-called denial of their fundamental rights, they should at least consider their own role in denying those same rights to others.

“There are few institutions more guilty than churches,”

he said, adding one need only look to the residential schools in Canada to see how the church took away both indigenous children and their religious ceremonies.

DEEP EMPATHY has much to do with trying to emulate Christ, who gave up power, privilege and position to take on the status of slave. Alan cited the writings of Paul as examples of empathy and Christ-inspired living.

Philippians 2:3-4 - *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your*

own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

1 Cor. 9:19 - *Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.*

1 Cor. 10:23-24 - *“I have the right to do anything,” you say—but not everything is beneficial. “I have the right to do anything”— but not everything is constructive. No one should seek their own good, but the good of others.*

“Deep empathy requires an awareness of our impact on others’ lives,” he said. “When we challenge COVID restrictions — and violate them — it doesn’t only have an impact on you. It’s not just about my rights, my freedom, my choice. We know there are ICUs and hospitals full of unvaccinated people.”

We should also be quick to defend the rights of others we see diminished.

“We should be standing with Muslims in Canada who feel threatened, even before we stand for our own rights,” he said.

INVERTED FEARLESSNESS means rejecting the politics of fear used by politicians to gain followers.

“We weaponize history by saying we’re living in the Nazi era, saying COVID restrictions are akin to the Nuremberg laws,” he said. “It’s promoting fear and it’s not accurate.”

This politics of fear isn’t unique to politicians. It happens in churches, which have listed communism, secular humanism, feminism, multilateralism, Islamic terrorism, and the erosion of religious freedoms as hot button issues to rally support and mobilize followers.

“There are many things to be concerned about in this world, but this politics of fear is toxic. It corrupts our empathy,” he said.

During the question and answer session at the end, Alan encouraged those gathered to access some resources for further information: *Think Again*, by Adam Grant, available on Amazon; and <https://www.christiansandthevaccine.com/>.