

## LOVE OF GOD AND NEIGHBOUR

Notes for a Prayer Breakfast

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Ottawa

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The famous words of Jesus, “Love one another as I have loved you” (John 13, 34-35), link explicitly love of God and love of neighbour. The two great commandments, found in both the New Testament and the Hebrew Torah, are one. Love of God is love of neighbour; love of neighbour is love of God.

This morning, I’d like to talk briefly about some people of varied backgrounds, who live out their faiths, combining love of God and love of neighbour often in the face of major adversities:

**Alexei Navalny** (Russia) - During his statement against his prison sentence in February, Navalny surprised some of his own followers by quoting from the Bible and indicating that he had become a Christian.

**Fethullah Gulen** - His early years in Eastern Turkey were shaped by unofficial Sufi networks and teachers, including his mother, who as Muslims share concepts and practices with Christianity. The Hizmet movement he founded advocates for peace and interfaith dialogue and has been particularly active in the field of education in many parts of the world.

Hong Kong Christians – One of many examples is Pastor Roy Chan and his wife of the Good Neighbor North District Church, who fled to the U.K. last October after police instructed a bank to freeze their accounts.

**Shahbaz Bhatti**, Pakistan’s Minister for Minorities, assassinated in 2011, was well aware of the dangers he faced. At one point, I’m told he led a group of Christian aid workers after an earthquake struck his country. They found a house where the roof had fallen and a man was trapped underneath. Bhatti helped him get out and then noticed slogans on the walls against Christians, such as “Kill the infidels.” Bhatti asked the man what sort of

facility it was. The answer was in effect that it was a training location for Al-Qaeda. The man added, "And you came here to save my life?" "Yes," Shahbaz replied, "Christianity is all about saving lives." For Bhatti, it was also about speaking up for all of Pakistan's religious minorities until the day of his death.

**Gao Zhisheng**, 57, often termed "the conscience of China", received a second nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2008. He had become a Christian after attending a Beijing house church, concluding, "In addition to physical needs, (people) also have equally important spiritual needs..." He later gained international acclaim for donating his lawyer's skills to defend evicted farmers, miners, underground Christians, dissidents and disabled persons. His public criticism of the Beijing persecution of the large Falun Gong community, a traditional exercise group with a spiritual component, triggered seven weeks of torture for himself. Shortly after his release for a brief period, Gao wrote a letter detailing his ordeal and authorized its release to the public in 2009, even though he had been threatened with death if he spoke publicly about his torture. His wife, Geng He, and two children had in the meantime escaped to America. She continues to fight for the release of her husband and others, but his whereabouts has been unknown in recent years and she doesn't know whether he is alive or dead. The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has called on the party-state of China to release Gao, terming his detention a violation of international law.

### National Prayer Breakfasts in Ottawa

A word now about Canada's National Prayer Breakfast in Ottawa—to be held this year on May 27- and about 3 speakers, among many, who have addressed either the breakfast or seminars afterwards and were especially strong on love of neighbours.

Retired General **Romeo Dallaire** is a national hero for his work as commander of the U.N. peacekeeping mission during the 1994 Rwandan Genocide. He was one of few officials who acquitted himself well throughout the entire ordeal, although he still insists on blaming himself. His personal courage and that of his tiny band of U.N. peacekeepers, while so many other foreigners were 'turning tail', seemed based on the Great Commandments. Dallaire says, "There must be God because I have shaken hands with the devil." He has published a new book, *They Fight Like*

*Soldiers, They Die Like Children*, about the plight of the estimated 250,000 child soldiers used by military and paramilitary organizations today across the world. On March 10 this year, he urged Canada to act on the genocide against the Uighur population in China.

Another speaker was **Kim Phuc**, whose photograph as a young Vietnamese girl running from napalm was judged in Japan to have been the most important photo of the entire 20th century. She now lives in Canada and her biography, *The Girl in the Picture*, was written by Denise Chong. Phuc spoke on reconciliation and how after she became a Christian she was able to forgive all who had caused her such grief, including the American who authorized bombing near her home. I believe she also met with the pilot who dropped the bomb which hit her-and forgave him. In 2019, Kim was awarded the Dresden Peace Prize in recognition of her work with UNESCO and as an activist for peace.

**Diane Morrison** was Executive Director of the Ottawa Mission for homeless men for 23 years, since she first brought skills as an innovative school teacher and committed Christian to an organization run by men since its founding in 1906. The Mission now serves 1200+ meals daily and provides a place for 233 men to sleep each night. Funding is provided by donations and governments. Donations help to support a school, drug and alcohol treatment, chaplaincy, job training, housing and health services for homeless men, women and children and a hospice. The staff and volunteers provide an atmosphere of encouragement, hope and acceptance to some of the most vulnerable people in the city. Morrison, the staff and volunteers saw many lives changed. The Diane Morrison Hospice at the Ottawa Mission continues to provide 24-hour palliative nursing care to the homeless. Now retired, she believes that persons with whom believers rub shoulders ought to see in us God's message of kindness and unconditional love for the human family with all persons of equal value.

Finally, vignettes about two more persons who practiced devotion to God and the social gospel:

**Rosa Parks** of Alabama changed American history when she refused to give up her bus seat to a white man in December 1955 and was arrested. In her book *Quiet Strength*, written long afterwards, she noted, "I felt the Lord would give me the strength to endure whatever I had to face. God did away

with all my fear.” The book explains how religion shaped her life and has been a central part of the American civil rights movement from the ‘50s up to the current Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. Things don’t always turn out as well for two billion or so Christians today as they did for Rosa Parks.

**Bishop Ryscylla Shaw** in early 2017 was installed as a Bishop of the Anglican Church of Canada. She's a citizen of the Métis Nation of Ontario (MNO) and is one of the first Métis to achieve this high position in any Christian church in Canada. She's also the daughter of MNO Senator Ruth Wayne. Bishop Shaw says: "I am motivated to advocate for, be present to, and work with the marginalized, the Indigenous, the LGBTQ, the downtrodden, the poor, the lonely, the oppressed, the broken. My life's work is about networking, broadening relationships and community building. Being Métis, I have a built-in cross-cultural perspective."

The hostility towards faith communities, especially Christians, in various parts of the world today is tragically creating many victims of all ages, probably more than at any time since Jesus was among us. Yet don't all of us still have an obligation to show solidarity with victims of religious persecution whatever their faith or absence of one? If our, say, Muslim neighbours know that we Christians denounce the persecution of Muslims in Myanmar, Xinjiang or anywhere, they might be more supportive when we raise our voices against the persecution of Christians around the world.

Having observed Christian and other faith communities around the world, I'm struck by how essentially similar are their answers to the question of how we can live our faith today. Many women, men and youth of diverse faith communities attempt in their daily lives to be points of light wherever they are. In Canada, consider First Nations peoples as they struggle to move ahead following the period of disgraceful colonization and residential schools. Reconciliation includes making sure that every First Nations child, woman and man has the right to a safe community with clean water.

Grace, God's love for all humanity, merits the final word. It is the one thing that only faith can provide in a pandemic world which craves it the most. Grace can bring transformation and hope. In a world filled with 'ungrace,' we believers should seek to dispense grace wherever we find ourselves.

Thank you all. ([www.david-kilgour.com](http://www.david-kilgour.com))