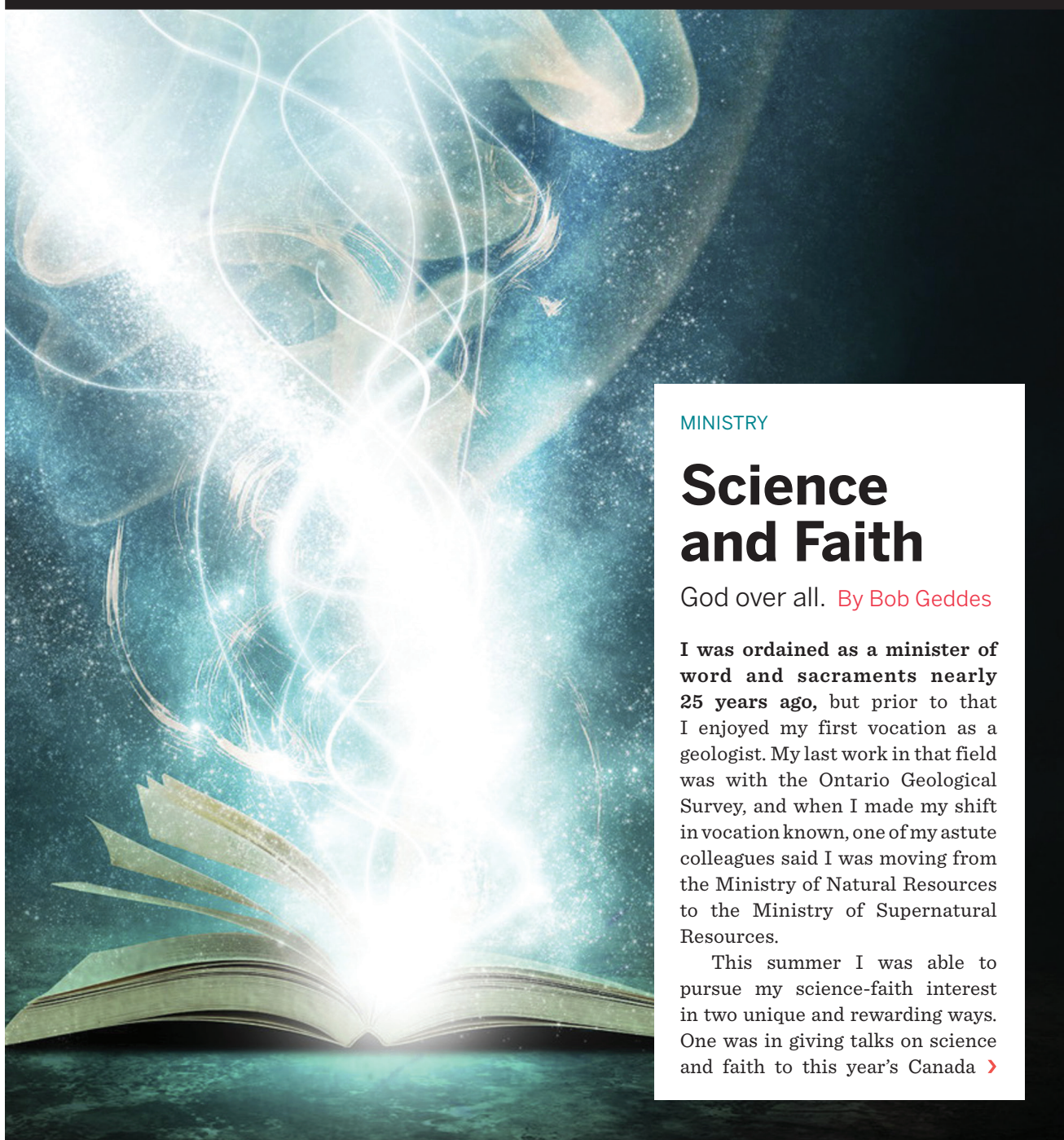


Focus

Stories of mission, ministry and community



MINISTRY

Science and Faith

God over all. **By Bob Geddes**

I was ordained as a minister of word and sacraments nearly 25 years ago, but prior to that I enjoyed my first vocation as a geologist. My last work in that field was with the Ontario Geological Survey, and when I made my shift in vocation known, one of my astute colleagues said I was moving from the Ministry of Natural Resources to the Ministry of Supernatural Resources.

This summer I was able to pursue my science-faith interest in two unique and rewarding ways. One was in giving talks on science and faith to this year's Canada >

MINISTRY, continued

The more we study, understand and marvel at the wonder and size of our planet and the cosmos, we discover how much greater and astounding God's love is for us. What a commendable calling it is to pursue science, and ... to celebrate scientific discovery

Youth event at Brock University. As a big CY supporter and former planning team member and event chaplain, I was delighted to participate in this way. The other event built upon my involvement with the Canadian Scientific and Christian Affiliation; this summer we hosted the annual conference of our elder cousin, the American Scientific Affiliation, at McMaster University, Hamilton, Ont.

I have come to understand my interest in faith and science as a gospel imperative. Recent surveys in North America indicate that a substantial reason why people are disassociating themselves from churches is the inconsistency between modern science and the perceived teachings of Christianity. I have tended to view this as an American phenomenon. Responses to my Canada Youth talks however would suggest otherwise. A common refrain from the youth after the talk was, "I am relieved to know it is okay to get into a scientific field as a career." When I hear that, I don't know whether to be happy or sad: happy because being a faith-based scientist is very fulfilling; sad because it confirms the attitude that somehow the two don't mix.

As a geologist, I have been heartened to learn of the relationship between the development of ancient earth geology and the contributions of Presbyterian leadership throughout the 1800s. What is more intriguing is that such a relationship was strongly encouraged in the evangelical wing of

the church.

The perceived conflict between science and Christian faith often hinges on the understanding of Genesis Chapter 1 and the age of the earth. As the antiquity of the age of the earth was being investigated in the 1800s and accepted many years before Darwin's critical publication, leadership within the Presbyterian Church played a prominent role. Thomas Chalmers, who became the first moderator of the evangelical Free Church of Scotland and namesake for many of our Canadian congregations, was not only a prominent preacher, but also a respected scientist and chemist. He was one of the first to put forward the gap model for interpreting Genesis, noting that long gaps of time were simply not recorded between the days in Genesis 1 (particularly Day 1 and Day 2).

Another major Free Church leader was Hugh Miller. He was a stonemason and journalist by trade. He became a celebrated expert on fossil fish, and hence a promoter of an extended age of the earth. He was one of the first to put forward the day-age theory, whereby each day of Genesis 1 could represent a series of extended events, or ages, which corresponds to known sequences as put forward by science.

Canadian Presbyterians were also significant influences on accommodating an ancient age of the earth with biblical principles. Foremost was Sir J. William Dawson,

geologist, educator and principal of McGill University for most of the last half of the 19th century. He wrote many books, with titles such as *Origin of the World According to Scripture and Science*, and *Nature and Science*. While he was criticized for a variety of theories and stances he upheld, he nonetheless remains the only scientist to have been president of both the British and American associations for the Advancement of Science, two pre-eminent organizations, even today.

The annual meeting of the ASA is usually held in a Christian liberal arts college or university in the United States; this year was one of the rare times it was held in Canada. To add to its uniqueness, for the first time on this continent, our British counterparts were officially invited to join. Their organization is known as Christians in Science. It was also a rare experience to hold the event in a major secular research institution, although McMaster's origin as a Baptist institution was certainly acknowledged.

The theme, "From Cosmos to Psyche: All things hold together in Christ" (Colossians 1:17), came from McMaster's motto. While there was a wide variety of presentations, from bioethics to environmental science to cosmology, I found the greatest inspiration from conversing with the participants. The ASA, as a founding principle, promotes respect and dialogue for various opinions. Harkening back to my 19th-century heroes, it upholds science as an honourable

vocation in understanding God's ways.

For example, one of the plenary speakers was Rev. Dr. Alasdair Coles, a neurologist, faculty member of Cambridge University, and researcher in new treatments for multiple sclerosis. He is also an ordained Church of England priest, serving in the Cambridge area. His talk was entitled "Broken Brains and Christ: What We Can Learn about Faith from People with Neurological Diseases." You can hear the talk on the ASA website. In the abstract, Coles states: "Many of our patients testified to increased dependence on their faith as their disease progresses. Religious faith can also provide meaning in a life of suffering.

"From such work, it is clear that the brain is naturally disposed to experience the divine and to process religious beliefs and worship. However, the reality of the Christian faith cannot be found by neurological study; that depends on external truth of whether or not Christ lived, died and resurrected. It is also clear that people may have different capacities to experience God and understand belief and worship. But we are all equally loved by God and from that came equal dignity and value."

Another was University of Toronto cosmologist Dr. Barth Netterfield. His talk was entitled "Astrophysics: The Heavens Declare the Glory of God." His presentation was doubly



interesting as he not only provided a whirlwind tour of the universe, but he showed how God's providence could be revealed within the practical and complex challenges of his research using high-altitude balloon-borne telescopes. The abstract for his talk states: "Astrophysical research has produced a view of the Universe which is vast beyond comprehension, with a startlingly long but finite history. Much of the behaviour and history of the Universe is understandable, yet there remain profound mysteries, not the least of which is the impression that the Universe has been 'fine tuned' for life."

Many of the talk titles reveal the importance of our Christian faith in

relation to this world: "The Beginning of the Universe," "Transformative Experiences in Creation Care," "The Hidden Things of God in the Ocean," "Noah and the Voice of Science," "Christians, Climate Change and Our Culture," and "Would God Frack?" (The last of these raised these issues: "I believe as Christians we are all called to do the work necessary to seek the truth in all aspects of life—even with fracking. I believe that sustainable fracking is one of many components necessary to realize the church's vision of integral human development. As Catholics we are called to seek the common good for our neighbours, both do-

mestically and internationally. That requires the development of clean, cheap energy for development.")

In the presentations to the participants at Canada Youth, we spent time in Bible study. In Genesis 1, we can find common ground despite the differences in how people might interpret Genesis and the age of the earth. For example we can all agree to some very critical principles: There was a creation, it started with a burst of light, it was done in a step-like process culminating in the creation of humanity, and it was good. If we bring in the creation narrative of John 1, as well as the ASA conference theme from Colossians, we can affirm the creation role of *Logos*—the Word, >

Be a Peacemaker



Right now, millions of people around the world are suffering as the result of armed conflict. More than ever the victims of violence are civilians. Caught in the crossfire, they endure displacement, hunger and unthinkable trauma.

Everyone deserves to be safe. Everyone deserves to be protected. Respond with us to the terrifying human suffering caused by war.

Be a Peacemaker. Donate Today.
WeRespond.ca/be-a-peacemaker



Presbyterian World Service & Development

50 Wynford Dr., Toronto ON M3C 1J7
 1-800-619-7301, ext. 291
WeRespond.ca/donate

Yes, I want to become a monthly donor using my credit card for \$ _____ /month!

Enclosed is my one-time donation for: \$ _____

Please provide the following credit card information

Visa Mastercard

Credit card #: _____

Expiry date: _____ CVV #: _____

Name on card: _____

Signature: _____

Address: _____


Phone #: _____ E-mail: _____

the presence of Christ.

Another fruitful Bible study which was shared with the youth, and which in fact undergirds every ASA meeting I have attended, centered on Psalm 8. The psalmist expresses his faith-filled cosmology by pondering the wonders of the universe, while at the same time questioning the significance of humanity: “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established: what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?” The psalmist goes on, however, to answer the question: “Yet you have made them a little lower than God.”

I am particularly intrigued when, with a few questions, our young people quickly understand that indeed, what a wondrous gift God has given humanity through the grace-filled sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The more we study, understand and marvel at the wonders and size of our planet and indeed the cosmos, like the psalmist, we discover how much greater and more astounding God’s love is for us. In other words, what a commendable calling it is to pursue science, and what an effective tool for evangelism it is for Christians to celebrate scientific discovery.

To listen to most of the lectures delivered at the conference visit the American Scientific Affiliation’s website at asa3.org.

To learn more about the Canadian Scientific and Christian Affiliation, visit csc.ca and for Christians in Science check out cis.org.uk. 

Rev. Bob Geddes is secretary treasurer of the Canadian Scientific and Christian Affiliation.