

Sermon “The Church we Never Could Have Imagined”

Kirk of St James

Sunday, June 14, 2026

Rev. Amanda Henderson-Bolton

Today’s sermon is going to be a little different than normal. Chad had told me I should write it the week before I went to Assembly but I just knew there were things that were going to come up at assembly that would affect what I wanted to say this morning and just like a broken clock can be right twice a day, I was right! I am going to take you through some of the pieces of assembly that I feel are important to highlight and share some about our denomination is doing in the world.

I want to start this morning talking about some of the amazing things that our church is doing not only in our country but also the wider world. For example, the Cutting Edge of Mission award this year, went to Upperlvl Worship. Austin Penner was a DJ who was huge on the club scene in Nanaimo BC. He was successful at his job, but it came with a cost as he struggled with addictions and other issues. As described on their website

“Austin didn’t grow up in the Christian faith. For over a decade, he struggled with addiction and identity until he hit rock bottom at 27. In that place of brokenness, he cried out to Jesus—and everything changed. In late 2021, Austin surrendered his life to Christ and began a journey of healing, freedom, and transformation.

Not long after, he walked into church for the first time and met Pastor Jeremy. The two quickly became close friends, united by a shared desire to reach people far from faith with the love of Jesus.

Austin had been DJing at LevelTwo Nightclub since 2017, but when the club reopened post-pandemic in 2022, his life looked radically different. Now sober and following Jesus, he wrestled with questions: *Can I still DJ? Could club music and ministry really go together? How can I share this amazing God with my network?*

Through prayer and reflection, Austin and Jeremy were inspired by how Jesus met people where they were—right in the middle of everyday life. That sparked a bold idea: what if they started a church in the club?

Doors opened quickly. In partnership with LevelTwo, their first Upperlvl Worship service launched—exactly one year after Austin got sober. In September 2022, he stepped back into the same DJ booth to share a different message — the radical love of Jesus through his music.

Today, Austin serves as worship DJ and lay-pastor of Upperlvl while pursuing a Master of Divinity degree. He creates custom DJ sets that remix worship anthems, hymns, EDM, and Christian hip hop—fusing high-energy sound with a life-changing message. Alongside a growing team, Austin is helping pioneer a fresh expression of church that brings the gospel to places the Church has often overlooked.”

The Kingdom of God can be found in the most incredible places. If you had told me, we would have an electric dance music and hip hop set complete with DJ stand and lights at General Assembly I would not have believed you—but it happened!

I was reminded of Hummingbird Ministries, Mary Fontaine is Nehiyaw (Cree) from Mistawasis Nehiywak, Saskatchewan, where she grew up attending the Mistawasis Presbyterian Church with her family. The Founding Director of Hummingbird Ministries (2005), an Indigenous-led healing and reconciliation ministry, Mary discerns the Spirit at work in Indigenous wisdom and spirituality and sees how this can enhance the church she loves and grew up in. Through healing circles and the performing arts, Hummingbird educates the public and raises the profile of Indigenous people, especially Indigenous children.

Then I spent a good deal of my week with Rev. Deb Stanbury who founded Arise ministries, to help women in the sex trade reclaim their lives through hope, love and justice, because everyone has a future worth having. Volunteers with Arise can be found on the streets of East Toronto handing out care supplies to sex trade workers and offering supports to help them reclaim their lives.

Outside of our churches across Canada who are ministering to their contexts and communities, we also have these incredible ministries doing much needed work among the most vulnerable. Lest you think the PCC is only worries about those within Canada, the work with Justice Ministries, PWS&D and others goes beyond borders. We heard from Rev. Jim Bear Jacobs a member of the Stockbridge-Munsee Mohican tribe, who is activist from the Twin Cities of Minneapolis, and told us about what happened when Operation Metro surge happened with ICE and the deaths of Renee Nicole Good and

Alex Pertti, and the networks they mobilized to protect people. At the end of his talk he implored and I quote, “That you give a damn.”

Then we heard from Deacon Bassem Thabet, and Nadar Anton Abuamsha, who works with Palestinian Refugees and are living the reality of what is happening in Gaza on a daily basis. One of them has experienced the death of five of their colleagues and their families. At the end of their presentations (as they work for different organizations) they reminded us that every statistic coming out of this situation represents real people and real families. Next week we will have the Rev. Lora Nafziger speak to us about her work in Nepal. I will also note that you can sign up for an upcoming trip to Nepal to see her work firsthand through our International Partner visits in Fall 2027.

Then there are the meetings, that go from 8:30 in the morning until about 9 at night. They are long days. The conversations can sometimes feel frustrating, circular, or unproductive, yet ultimately it is through the collective wisdom of these voices that we work to discern a way through complex issues. We discussed MAiD, rising Christian Nationalism, among other weighty topics. I am glad we are part of a denomination willing to ask difficult questions, to bear witness to atrocities, to champion peace through justice, and not shy away from things just because they are difficult. The Presbyterian Church in Canada engages in the world in meaningful and well thought out ways.

I also commend them on how far they have come with the young adult representatives at Assembly. When I was a YAR, we had no voice, we were there as observers. This was back in 2004, and when I told them that one of them helpfully said, “Oh, the year I was born.” Now the YAR’s can make motions, and amendments, they have an advisory vote to show the assembly how they would vote, and they are empowered to speak. Their voice was invaluable at this assembly, especially when it came to the discussion around things like AI. Their motions and amendments strengthened what we

were doing. One point that came up repeatedly was that people kept saying they were so glad they are the future of our church, to which they replied, we are a part of the church now.

When Austin, who helped found Upperlvl Worship was speaking he made the comment that oftentimes he feels like he can only see about one foot in front of his face, and I understood that comment well. When we look at our scripture readings today Abraham and Sarah could not have imagined what God had planned or what it would look like. In Matthew when Jesus sends the disciples into the world, they could not have imagined what that would look like. The Bible is full of people who do not have one sweet clue about how God is going to call them and use them in the world, the important part is that they said yes. During one of the prayers for Assembly I used a part of a quote from Jan Richardson and her work called *Blessing for the Journey* and in it she says, “If you could see the journey whole, you might never undertake it, might never dare the first step that propels you from the place you know toward the place you know not. There is nothing for it but to go. And by our going take the vows the pilgrim takes, to be faithful to the next step.”

So, for someone who went into Assembly mildly annoyed and resentful that I had to read 250 pages of reports, spend five days of my life in meetings, and sleep on the worst university dorm mattress I have ever encountered, I came away thankful that I had to. I was reminded of why what we do matters. Encouraged by the good I witnessed and heard about. And also buoyed, and by that I mean, none of us in the church knows exactly what our call will look like, we do not know all the Good the Kirk will yet do in the world or even the shape our ministries may yet take, however, within the Kingdom of God we do not need all the answers, we just need to say yes, and then see where that takes us. That is both scary and exciting yet, at the end of the day, I am not sure we would want it any other way.