

Bridging worlds

On September 23, Christ the Redeemer—the oldest church in Surrey—celebrated its 125th anniversary. I talked to the Priest-in-Charge, the Rev. Craig Vance, on the challenges he has faced as a new priest on the block.

Craig Vance is sitting in front of his Macbook, typing an email. His office has a dishevelled, but homey look about it; scruffy books burst from the shelves, an acoustic guitar leans up against a chair, and a large Harry Potter poster adorns the wall. After he clicks the send button, Craig tugs on his greying beard and chats for a while about a podcast he wants to do on “the Christianity of Harry Potter.” It’s hard to believe he sits at the helm of the oldest church in Surrey.

Craig is relatively new to the priesthood, but even as a young man he had religious aspirations. “In high school I was either going to go into the ministry or into law—I said I was either going to work for God or the devil full-time.” As it turned out, the impatience and idealism of his twenties sent him down a different path. Craig wasn’t ordained until later in life, after some vivid dreams led him to believe God was calling him to the priesthood.

Becoming a priest wasn’t as easy as he’d thought. “The process to priesthood is very rigorous—you’re in a fish bowl and people are evaluating you.” His first post was at a Kwakiutl First Nations community in Kingcome Inlet. He was met with hostility at first, until people started trusting him. They opened up about their horrific experiences at residential schools. This experience led to Craig representing the church at the Indian

Residential Schools ADR hearings, where he publicly apologized for injustices of the past. “It was one of the most human moments I’ve had in my life so far.”

Craig’s experience in a cross-cultural environment helps him deal with the challenges of ministering at Christ the Redeemer, a church with a long history and entrenched traditions. “You’ve got people here who’ve been baptized, confirmed, married and went to school in the one-room schoolhouse.” With Surrey being the fastest growing city in the Lower Mainland, bridging that rural-urban gap is a challenge. Parishioners “need to find a way of holding onto their traditions while welcoming new people in.”

For the past year, Craig has reached out to the community in many ways, such as by hosting a talk with David Suzuki, and by putting on jazz vespers. Craig believes celebrations like the 125th anniversary are essential to uniting people, but admits that he doesn’t know what comes next: “What could bring the church together in such a marvellously cohesive way, a way that combines our heritage with reaching out to the community? It’s a long time to wait for the 150th anniversary!”

After putting so much energy into the church, Craig has learned much about being a leader—but sometimes you can’t do it all. As Craig says, you also have to know “the fine art of knowing when not to lead—when to step back and just let things happen.”