

REGENT COLLEGE

**DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE WISDOM:  
PERCEPTIONS OF WISDOM AND BIBLICAL PROVERBS  
IN A LOCAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY IN VANCOUVER**

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## Introduction: Exploring Perceptions of Wisdom

In the Book of Proverbs, wisdom is deeply contextual.<sup>1</sup> While the proverbs themselves provide flexible tools for navigating life’s thorniest problems, these tools must be used skillfully— otherwise they are useless or even dangerous.<sup>2</sup> It takes wisdom to understand a situation and know which proverb to apply. These proverbs are not a set of one-size-fits-all rules, but take practice and training to use. The Book of Proverbs teaches that wisdom is gained in large part by learning from others, especially the wise.<sup>3</sup>

For these reasons, understanding wisdom in the Book of Proverbs should be done in community, with others, and particularly among the wise.<sup>4</sup> As Kathy and Tim Keller point out, “We should...never forget that Proverbs was written not for private reading but as a manual to be worked through in a community of learners, with older, wiser mentors.”<sup>5</sup> Context may determine use and wisdom should be gathered within a particular community to take advantage of the wisdom of a place. Commentaries and perspectives on the Book of Proverbs are often performed by academics and pastors, frequently— though not exclusively— in Western contexts. While these perspectives are valuable, they represent only a fraction of the possible array of

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<sup>1</sup> Tremper Longman III, “To Answer or Not Answer?: Reading Text, Culture, and Soul with Wisdom,” *Word & World* 41, no. 3 (January 1, 2021): 231. EbscoHost PDF.

<sup>2</sup> Proverbs 26:6, 9.

An interesting 20th-century cross-domain example is provided by John Messenger. He describes how a (non-Biblical) proverb spoken at the wrong time by a court case defendant convinced the court of his guilt. See John C. Messenger, “The Role of Proverbs in a Nigerian Judicial System,” *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 15, no. 1 (1959): 68. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3629005>.

<sup>3</sup> Proverbs 13:20 and Proverbs 19:20.

<sup>4</sup> Proverbs 15:2, Proverbs 14:7-9.

<sup>5</sup> Kathy Keller and Tim Keller, *God’s Wisdom for Navigating Life*, (Viking, 2017), xi.

insights and understandings on Biblical wisdom literature.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, their perspectives may lack utility in different cultural settings. As Miguel A. De La Torre points out in *Reading the Bible from the Margins*, “the Bible was not written by or for scholars; it was written to and for the body of believers. When we relegate understanding of the text solely to ministers and scholars, the Bible becomes captive to their particular social locations.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, Proverbs must be explored and analyzed in local settings, giving voice to laypeople and outsiders with valuable light to shed on practical wisdom outside of churches and academic institutions.<sup>8</sup> Local people need local understandings of how Proverbs might apply to their context. Conversely, people across the world may find refreshing help in a non-local perspective.<sup>9</sup>

Hearing many voices is particularly important because individual Proverbs can be approached from many directions, with radically different interpretations and applications.<sup>10</sup> As

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<sup>6</sup> For a classic work giving broader voice to Biblical interpretation, see R.S Sugirtharajah., ed. *Voices from the Margin* (Orbis Books, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> De La Torre, Miguel, *Reading the Bible from the Margins*, (Novalis, 2002),: 11-12.

<sup>8</sup> In *Reading the Bible with the Damned*, theologian Bob Ekblad relates the story of reading the story of Jacob wrestling the angel with Maria, an impoverished and illiterate woman in Honduras. Though Maria enters the Bible study protesting of her ignorance, she ends up providing a rich array of insights on par with the latest theological research. Ekblad had just presented a paper in Montpellier, France on the passage, and so could comment on how perceptive Maria’s points were. Maria’s example show how an outsider can provide perspective as astute as cutting-edge academic theologians. But an outsider might also provide an *even better* or more applicable perspective, based on their social location.

<sup>9</sup> In a given place, someone might need to have an understanding of a Proverb that makes sense for that given place. At the same time, an insight from far away might provide a unique and creative application. Paradoxically, one needs *both* local and global perspectives, from one’s context and from out of one’s context. The metaphor of farming is helpful here. Farming techniques must be adapted to one’s particular land and area. The best farmer to learn from is a local farmer who knows the weather patterns, the ecology, and the soil. At the same time, a different farming technique from a distant community may provide an agricultural breakthrough. Both are needed, and in both cases it is *particular communities* that yield fruitfulness, not only, say, a farm research institute— as valuable as those can be.

<sup>10</sup> For example, Van Heerden shows the various ways the paradox of Proverbs 26:4-5 have been approached. S.W. Van Heerden, “Strategies Applied By Interpreters of the Paradox in Proverbs 26:4-5,” *Journal for Semitics*, Vol. 17, no. 2 (2008): 591-617.

a result, diverse insights can be immensely valuable.<sup>11</sup>

Aside from the benefit to personal applications, adding voices to the field of interpretations can have even more important, societal impact. De La Torre points out that traditional interpretations of the Bible have been often used to justify injustice. To liberate the Bible from readings contaminated by power and privilege, he argues, the Bible should be read from the margins.<sup>12</sup> As he points out, “Although textual interpretations have been used to justify racism, classism, and sexism, can the same text also liberate those who are oppressed because of their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or class? To do so, it must be read with the eyes of the disenfranchised.”<sup>13</sup>

Adding voices to the table is, therefore, crucial on at least four levels. The first is personal, pastoral, and practical: in any given locale, more voices need to be heard for people to better understand the wisdom of Proverbs in their particular context. Second, at the societal level, hearing from the disenfranchised is a powerful corrective on oppressive ways of reading Scripture. Third, in the realm of Biblical studies and interpretation, hearing these voices can broaden understanding. Finally, in terms of scholarship in history and sociology, too little is

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<sup>11</sup> For example, in her paper “In the Ant’s School of Wisdom: A holistic African-South African Reading of Proverbs 6:6-11” Madipoane Masenya gives an entirely different lens to view Proverbs 6, which encourages the listener to go observe an ant to learn wisdom. While westerners have read the text in terms of industry and planning, Masenya pulls out other themes, including the connectedness of humans to nature and the crucial practice of aligning one’s actions, like the ant, to the rhythms of the natural world. Masenya argues that this proverb invites the reader to listen to and seek wisdom from the created world more generally, as “what one observes in the natural cosmos has implications for understanding the social and moral order.” Masenya grew up in a village on the Lepelle river in South Africa, so her interpretation of Proverbs 6 is valuable for someone in a similar agricultural context whose livelihood depends on harmonizing with natural seasons. But it is also a helpful challenge to a modern urbanite whose rhythms may be completely out of sync with the natural world. Thus, Masenya demonstrates how diverse interpretations are crucial to both locals and non-locals. Madipoane Masenya (ngwan’ a Mphahlele), “In the Ant’s School of Wisdom: A Holistic African-South African Reading of Proverbs 6:6-11,” OTE 28, no. 2 (2015): 429. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2312-3621/2015/v28n2a11>.

<sup>12</sup> During this study, I was challenged by one of the participants who expressed a dislike of the term “margins.” He explained, “I think margins is a very kind of nasty word, honestly, in a way, because it says, well, we’re in the center and these others are in the margins.” Because the scholarship uses this word, I will continue to use it, albeit sparingly.

<sup>13</sup> De La Torre, *Reading the Bible from the Margins*: 4.

known about how laypeople and people with less power conceive of wisdom and Proverbs than voices of historical power. Both academically and practically, then, much can be gained from studying conceptions of Proverbial wisdom in a specific community.

The purpose of the following study, then, is to explore how long-term Christian residents in the Downtown Eastside (DTES) of Vancouver understand and apply the wisdom of Proverbs on the ground. The central research question asks how local Christian elders understand Proverbial definitions of wisdom, the process of gaining wisdom, and the ways of living wisely in their context. The Downtown Eastside, one of the most unique and infamous neighborhoods in Western Canada, represents a particularly strong cultural milieu as well as unique, complex problems.<sup>14</sup> The struggles of displaced peoples, unhoused communities, conflicts with the police, and a fentanyl crisis contribute to a neighborhood that has many needs and much to offer.<sup>15</sup> Historically, it has been a contested, controversial location of great political import.<sup>16</sup>

The hope of the study will help fill in a knowledge gap about the perceptions of Biblical wisdom within the diverse local Downtown Eastside Christian community. While some literature exists on the Downtown Eastside, and literature exists on perceptions of the Bible, almost no known literature reflects both.

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<sup>14</sup> One member of Parliament noted in 2008 that, “Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside gets more attention than pretty well any other neighborhood in Canada. People are alternately shocked, saddened, disgusted, and awestruck at the various news stories about it.” Cran, Brad. 2008. *Hope in Shadows : Stories and Photographs of Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside*. Arsenal Pulp Press: 9.

<sup>15</sup> Long heralded as “the poorest neighborhood in Canada,” it certainly ranks as one of, if not the, most poverty-stricken postal codes in the nation. Cran, *Hope in Shadows*, 18; Travis Lupick, “Is Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside still the ‘poorest postal code’ in Canada?” *The Georgia Straight*, (April 8th, 2019): <https://www.straight.com/news/1225081/vancouver-downtown-eastside-still-poorest-postal-code-canada>

<sup>16</sup> Politicians opened the first supervised injection site in North America on its streets. Campbell, *A Thousand Dreams*, 171.

In 1997, it was reported that it had the worst HIV/AIDS rates in the Western World. Larry Campbell, Neil Boyd, and Lori Culbert, *A Thousand Dreams : Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside and the Fight for Its Future*, (Vancouver, Greystone Books, 2009), 96.

## **Methodology**

Qualitative research is uniquely positioned to discover the perceptions and experiences of individuals. As such, it represents a powerful methodology in eliciting and analyzing how this study's participants understand wisdom. As opposed to a quantitative study that might provide numerical data across a broad spectrum, this qualitative study brings to light the multi-faceted perceptions within a handful of individuals, seeking to understand their worldview on wisdom thoroughly.

In sum, six Downtown Eastside residents were interviewed in group and individual settings. To find research participants, the researcher asked four Christians who had lived or worked in the Downtown Eastside for at least a decade to name the wisest Christians they could think of, preferencing those over fifty and those who had also been involved in the Downtown Eastside for at least 10 years. The people on this list were then, when possible, contacted and asked the same question. From this expanded list, interview participants were chosen based on a combination of these recommendations and availability.

The study used a semi-structured interview method that included both in-person and video conferencing interviews. These interviews included two individual interviews and one focus group of four people. Participants were asked a series of questions about the nature of wisdom, about growing in wisdom, and about sources of wisdom in the Downtown Eastside. Each topic included asking participants to explain their understanding of a specific Biblical proverb related to the subject. The researcher asked follow-up questions as the interviews continued. (Full interview questions included in the appendix.)

This study included six participants in all. Each participant had at least ten years of engagement with the Downtown Eastside. All identified as Christian and were involved in

formal and/or informal ministry. Participants were both male and female, ranging from 30 to 60, and of Caucasian and Asian descent. Each interview lasted just over an hour.

### **Reflexivity and Limitations**

The researcher is a committed Christian who believes in the wisdom of Proverbs, which provides both a passion for this subject as well as a bias in this project towards responses that clearly align with his understanding of biblical Proverbs. The researcher is a committed Christian who believes in the wisdom of Proverbs, which provides both a passion for this subject as well as a bias in this project towards responses that clearly align with his understanding of biblical Proverbs. The researcher is a white, educated American male in his mid-thirties, which represents a significant lens on viewing the world. The researcher is also a new resident (one year) of the Downtown Eastside. This has significant limitations as well as benefits. Some familiarity with the neighborhood is helpful for basic grounding in geography and culture. At the same time, fresh eyes are an asset— certain aspects of the DTES will emerge more clearly, and there will not be an expertise bias.

This was certainly a mini-study, and did not seek to create a “representative” portrait of wisdom perceptions in the Downtown Eastside. Only six participants were interviewed, four in a focus group, and the total interview length was less than five hours. Moreover, the people interviewed were somewhat homogeneous in that they were of only two ethnic backgrounds, within thirty or so years of age, and all involved directly in ministry. The entire project process took place over just one semester, with limited funding and conducted by an inexperienced researcher. Despite these limitations, the hope in approaching the study was that the combined experience of the participants would provide rich insights despite the brief engagement and small

sample size.

The study sought to be performed ethically. First, each participant was selected on the recommendations of some person or persons who respected them, allowing them to be approached with an attitude of respect. The open-ended questions allowed participants to respond as they chose and did not elicit painful answers unless volunteered. From the start, individual participants had the opportunity to remain anonymous. Before interviewing, consent forms were offered. After interviewing, an initial draft of the research was sent to participants asking for feedback and making sure the way they were referred to in the study was appropriate.

## **Findings**

### **Unexpected Teachers: Views of Wisdom from the Downtown Eastside**

Several themes emerged strongly from this series of interviews. In this section these themes will be described and explored, with connections to prior research and possible applications suggested.

#### *Collective, Not Individual, Wisdom*

Before the interviews even began, the researcher's paradigm for wisdom was contested. Two of those who had been identified by others as wise responded to the initial request about "wisest Christians" with a challenge. Both called into question the individualistic nature of the query. One member of the Mosaic church community responded to an initial query by writing, "Your project seems quite individualistic in terms of how it comes across. In what way are you integrating the wisdom of communities as wholes?" Another respondent offered, "I don't think there is anyone who is 'the wisest'. [sic] My experience is that there has been (and is) a collective



wisdom. There are people I seek wisdom from for different things...” Rather than seeing an individual as being particularly wise, these respondents viewed the depository, or vessel, of wisdom more broadly *as a community*. Wisdom is not found so much in a person, they pointed out, as in a group of people.<sup>17</sup>

This theme came across strongly, if less explicitly, during the interviews. When asked about examples of *individuals* who had grown in wisdom in particularly noticeable ways, two participants volunteered stories about *communities* that had grown in wisdom. E., who has spent over a dozen years living in community houses in the Downtown Eastside as a artist, church leader, and missionary, explained, “I don't have a specific person, but...as a collective, I feel like [our church] has grown in wisdom over the years, mostly through our mistakes...being willing to be wrong and humility and...sticking out tough, awkward conversations and not giving up on each other.”

R., who grew up in Vancouver and has spent most of their life in the Downtown Eastside, brought up the story of overhearing a conversation between participants of a group Bible study applying the theme of meekness to a particular situation. P., a mental health counselor and lay pastor who has lived in the Downtown Eastside for twenty years, explained,

I think growing in wisdom, it is important to be connected with a community of people that you are weighing things with, that you are doing life together with rather than being solo, because I don't think our wisdom is just solo, me and God or me and scripture. *I think it is something enacted within a community, considering the context, and we gain that wisdom through connection with others and weighing our experiences through feedback as well.* [emphasis mine] (P.)

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<sup>17</sup> Prior to the interviews, the researcher had written about the importance of collective and contextual wisdom. Yet this response to methodology revealed that, to some extent, the researcher still had a significant bias towards individuals being the storehouses of wisdom. Even in a study about the wisdom *of a community*, this bias came through.

Wisdom is held by people *together*; not separately, participants believed. Perhaps as a result, respondents advocated that being connected in community was both wise in and of itself and also a pathway to wisdom. Asked about living wisely in the Downtown Eastside, participants advocated for “plugging into” community. When sharing the story of an individual who grew in wisdom, it was noted that it was as he “connected into community” and “allowed people to come alongside” that he grew in wisdom.

According to the interviewees— and even those initially approached for interviews— wisdom in the Downtown Eastside is not seen as an individual endeavor. People don’t hold wisdom on their own. Rather, communities hold wisdom, and so wisdom must be sought in the context of community connection.

This focus on community resonates with much of what has been said and written about the Downtown Eastside. Observers had noted that “There is an unmistakable sense of community in the Downtown Eastside”<sup>18</sup> and that “from [the residents’] experience comes the truest sense of community that you will ever encounter.”<sup>19</sup>

The Downtown Eastside’s community-focused culture and this concept of collective wisdom offers rich research possibilities. First of all, qualitative researchers might be interested in studying how such a strong and powerful sense of community developed in a global city in a country indexed as one of the most individualistic in the world.<sup>20</sup> Secondly, this finding lends support to seeking the perspective of groups as well as individuals in qualitative research, especially in terms of focus groups. Third, when seeking out exemplary models of success or

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<sup>18</sup> Campbell, *A Thousand Dreams*, 287-290.

<sup>19</sup> Cran, *Hope in Shadows*, 12.

<sup>20</sup> Ivana Načinović Braje, Maja Klindžić, and Lovorka Galetić (2019) “The role of individual variable pay in a collectivistic culture society: an evaluation.” *Economic Research Ekonomska Istraživanja*, 32:1, (July 2019): 1355.

failure, it suggests looking for successful *groups* instead of individuals.<sup>21</sup> In terms of the study of Biblical wisdom literature, it suggests that commentaries benefit from hosting diverse individual perspectives, but also investigating collective understandings of particular communities. Pastorally, it reinforces a traditional viewpoint of engaging with Bible study in community, among others.

### *The Unexpected Other*

#### “Sidewalk Prophets”

Given the value the participants expressed for community, it is perhaps no surprise that learning from others was frequently mentioned as a way to grow in wisdom. Moreover, this idea was reinforced by asking participants to comment on Proverbs 13:20 which states, *Those who walk with the wise become wise.*

What was less expected was *who* participants recommended learning wisdom from. Several participants made it very clear that wisdom is often taught by people that are ordinarily ignored or overlooked. When asked where wisdom was calling out in the Downtown Eastside, one participant explained, “Lots of sidewalk prophets, lots of people just hanging out on the street who, if you take the time to stop and talk with them, will share little nuggets of gold that are just, that shouldn't be unexpected. Um, yeah, shouldn't be unexpected, but sometimes...it is, or it feels that way.” Later this same participant noted, “some of the wisest bits of advice I've gotten have been from guys selling stuff on Main and Hastings.”

Another participant explained,

...I have been absolutely sharpened and honed by people down here, some of whom can't read. And some of whom, you know, never graduated, some of whom have

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<sup>21</sup>Daniel Coyle has taken this approach in his books *The Talent Code* and *The Culture Code*. Daniel Coyle, *The Culture Code*, (Batam 2018); Daniel Coyle, *The Talent Code*, (Batam 2009).

been in addiction for years, and they've absolutely taught me huge lessons of wisdom that I never would have learned anywhere else...So I think that that's I think we have really narrowed our understanding of wisdom to educated... and successful. And I think that's wrong. And I actually think there's...idolatry there...I think that there is a huge amount of wisdom in other places that we have neglected. So, yeah, I'm always looking for wisdom wherever I go. (R.)

Wisdom, then, was seen not as the possession of those who were educated, successful, or even law-abiding. Rather, wisdom was seen as a treasure that anyone might offer at any given time.

Expanding the net of who might be considered “wise” will open up a treasure trove of wisdom in the study of Biblical literature. Asking for interpretations from those long relegated to beyond the edges of academia could provide rich insights not only for churches but for the academy. This provides an impetus for more collaboration between the academy and the streets and between the literate and the illiterate. Those with access to education and publications might be wise to discover Wisdom calling out in the streets, heeding that call and listening to those who offer not credentials but rich experience and insight.

Pastorally, this perspective is a powerful corrective against creating cultures of inequality or unequal access to church community, in line with Biblical recommendations.<sup>22</sup>

#### “Time Travel Wisdom”

In this study, dead people were also seen as a source of wisdom. Two different respondents highlighted the importance of historical mentors– saints and theologians who had passed away hundreds or thousands of years ago, yet who were still seen as crucial helps in everyday life. In describing the process by which they learned to pray, R. explained, “...I've read lots of books on prayer, so I've sought out counsel from the saints, for sure,” and went on to

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<sup>22</sup> James 2:1-13.

explain how the early church fathers and mothers, as well as the 19th century Russian author of *The Way of the Pilgrim*, had influenced them. The church fathers and mothers were also referenced as they discussed their understanding of types of wisdom.

Matthew Johnson, a clergyperson with twenty years of formal church ministry in the Downtown Eastside, discussed the live mentors that had guided him in academia and on the streets of Vancouver. He then turned towards the past, saying,

I will tell you that when I go out on the street... I am bringing a whole host of people with me: people like Karl Rahner...people like St. Anselm, people like Thomas Aquinas...They are there with me every time I journey out... And so those people are with me...nudging me in one way or another, in midst of conversation or an interaction of some kind...I sense their presence with me and their prayers for me...of those mentors. (Johnson)

While it may be common in academia to reference the long-dead famous figures of the faith, this study underlined how crucial it is for those engaged in cutting edge, front-line work in urgent modern contexts, suggesting that the work of translating wisdom into every dialect might be expanded past the Bible to include early works. This concept could also be studied sociologically in examining what ancient thinkers and theologians have impacted various communities across the world, tracing their impact geographically and chronologically. Pastorally, it urges leaders of faith communities to help their congregants engage with saints of ages past.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>C.S. Lewis famously said, “We need intimate knowledge of the past...A man who has lived in many places is not likely to be deceived by the local errors of his native village: the scholar has lived in many times and is therefore in some degree immune from the great cataract of nonsense that pours from the press and the microphone of his own age.” C.S. Lewis, “Learning in Wartime,” *St. Mary the Virgin*, (sermon, Oxford, Autumn, 1939). Accessed <https://dailytrust.com/excerpt-from-learning-in-wartime-by-c-s-lewis/>.

Learning from others was one of the primary ways participants identified in growing in wisdom. They explicitly stated, though, that the range of teachers should be expanded to include the struggling, the uneducated, and the dead.<sup>24</sup>

### *Reflection as Teacher*

Perhaps the strongest theme identified in the interviews as a whole was that of learning from reflecting on lived experience. Every single participant interviewed either explicitly mentioned, affirmed, or offered an example of reflection being crucial to growing in wisdom. Johnson summarized the process as, “Do something, then reflect and learn, and then do it again, and reflect and learn. And that it is a sort of dialectic process that is always ongoing.” P. contrasted the wisdom of learning in community with another type of wisdom, as, “gaining the wisdom through...reflection and....connection with God, that’s a kind of a slow process of listening.” The constant dialogue between reflection and experience was an aid to growing in wisdom.

This strong perspective is a challenge to organizations, ministries, and churches who make content and experience primary. Instead of learning and doing more, this viewpoint emphasizes the crucial requirement to reflect in order to grow.

### *The Greatest Teacher: Suffering*

One type of experience was highlighted as particularly valuable to becoming wise: suffering. Asked how one grows in wisdom, R. responded by saying,

...suffering, failure, and irrelevancy...that's largely the way that you grow...you fail. You realize that you can't do certain things, or you couldn't, or you made mistakes...in your

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<sup>24</sup>Masenya might add that this list should include listening to even more voices– including the natural world and the humble ant. Masenya, “In the Ant’s School of Wisdom,” 421-432.

suffering, you grow closer to Christ-likeness.. If you take on your responsibility in the suffering, which is to not waste your suffering, to not just retreat into yourself, but to retreat through yourself into God, and to deny your false self and into the true self. I think that's probably it, which is similar to how people go through recovery stuff. You know, you fail, you fall down, you get back up, you look at why you failed and you keep going. So, I think that's probably how we grow in wisdom best. (R.)

Throughout their interview, R. returned to suffering and failure again and again as a source of wisdom. It was the way, for example, of learning how to pray without ceasing. R. elaborated further, saying, “I think suffering is a great tool, it's horrible, but... failure and suffering is probably the only for-sure tool to help us grow into wisdom.” In a personal anecdote, R. named how two years of debilitating back pain had been a source of insight and wisdom in their life.

When asked for any other thoughts at the end of the interview, A. contributed similar ideas on how suffering might produce wisdom, adding,

The other thing we didn't really talk directly about, but I think is so huge is... the connection between suffering and wisdom...All of us who have been here for a longer stretch have gone through... circumstances or seasons that were really painful ... in hindsight.... those do yield a lot of wisdom...it's not even necessarily wisdom that you could ...articulate with words, but ...your spiritual disposition has been reshaped in a way...that people can experience and feel....I think, too, journeying with people who have suffered a lot more...you get a kind of, you know, a secondhand wisdom that comes out of that...sharing in that suffering. (A.)

Scholars in both sociology and Biblical studies might find great insight by focusing more on the role of suffering in shaping individuals and communities. In particular, the study of “secondhand wisdom” from “sharing in that suffering” of others might yield psychological insight into how being in relationship to those suffering molds an individual.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> In *Hope in Shadows*, Kathy Walker, a long-time resident of the Downtown Eastside who chose to raise her children while publicly challenging drug dealers, shared that, “Being separated from the suffering of the world is dehumanizing, and children who are isolated grow up to be adults that don't deeply understand people and don't have a deep sense of compassion... I have exposed my children to suffering, but it has been mediated by a

*“Do Not Be Wise in Your Own Eyes”*

The most powerfully emphasized theme in the study— the topic that every single participant landed on at least once— was that of humility. Humility was understood as being crucial to how wisdom was both gained and lived out. Asked to describe how to tell if someone is wise, Johnson quipped, “How can you tell if someone is wise? Their lips are not moving all the time.” Johnson talked about the concept of “beginner’s mind” and described his own personal mantra as, “I am learning to do things differently” or “I am learning to see things differently.” Humility was mentioned explicitly several times, especially in the focus group interview. The flip side was also alluded to— the danger of a lack of humility. P. mentioned that, “I have not seen people last very long [in the Downtown Eastside] who are not humble.” Even before the interview, R. was clear about not being willing to receive the title of wisdom that others had given him. In the interview he said, “I would first of all say that accepting the label of wisdom I think is something that would be incredibly unwise to do. So I don't accept that.” O. warned, “In modern societies, it's easy to trust in your skills and your knowledge and your wisdom ...your skills, your knowledge, your intellect, your training, your education... you can easily behave as though God doesn't exist.”

When asked what proverb they would want to pass on to future generations in the Downtown Eastside, two separate participants in separate interviews— R. and P.— both offered Proverb 3:7-8, which is, “Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and turn away from

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celebration of community and friendship... Without this it would perhaps just be a harsh reality, but with it we are exposing them to shared suffering that is rooted in compassion.” Cran, *Hope in Shadows*, 135.

Ekblad wrote that, “For me, this descent into the suffering world has become my own life story.” Ekblad, *Reading the Bible With the Damned*, xvii. More generally, choosing to suffer with others is a core part of the Christian story, one that bears closer examination in a variety of disciplines.



evil. It will be a healing for your flesh and a refreshment for your body.” Humility is, according to participants, the core of wisdom.

It might be pointed out that humility allows the other pathways to wisdom to be open. It takes humility to recognize that experience alone requires reflection to become wisdom. It takes humility to learn from others, especially those who have been dead for centuries and those of lower social position.<sup>26</sup> To get wisdom, then, requires an open heart that is willing to receive God’s instruction from a variety of teachers, some of whom may seem unlikely.<sup>27</sup>

### *Other Patterns: Psalms and Slowing Down*

Many other patterns emerged in the interviews— less strongly, but nonetheless significant. Among these, two were most striking. While the interview questions focused on the Proverbs, participants often responded with Psalms. For one participant, praying the Psalms was incredibly important, while another described a Psalm on her wall about sowing in tears as particularly meaningful. Often these Psalms were connected to suffering and lament. In the emotionally tumultuous world of the Downtown Eastside, in which suffering and loss are always present, it seems that the Psalms provided particular strength and comfort to long-time residents.

Secondly, two participants described in vivid detail the wisdom of slowing down. E. described spending time with a particular friend who walked everywhere in the Downtown Eastside very, very slowly, but who taught her much through that approach, which contrasted to her own tendency to rush. R. shared about traveling to a remote northern village for a funeral,

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<sup>26</sup> Ekblad points out, “Drawing closer to marginalized people requires, first, an attitude of humility.” Ekblad, *Reading the Bible with the Damned*, xi.

<sup>27</sup>Masenya quotes Hubbard in describing how Proverbs Chapter 6 advocates becoming wise in this way, “A person over five feet tall and weighing 130 pounds or more is told to let an ant be teacher, an ant less than a quarter of an inch long, weighing a slight fraction of an ounce. A person with gifts of speech, with a brain, the size of a whole anthill, is told to bend over, peer down, and learn from the lowly ant.” Masenya quoting David Hubbard, *Proverbs* (Dallas, Tex.: Word Books, 1979), 99.

and observing how every single member of that community stopped and honored the funeral procession as it went by. R. observed,

Wisdom is saying, “We honor what's happening right now, as a community. We have lost as a community, we will support as a community.” Foolishness is saying, “I'm just going to go get somewhere.” So that's, that's a place where I just learned, right. That is the proper approach to not be speeding through these things, but you take your time because that is what's required. That's the work that needs to be done. (R.)

### **Discussion**

The picture drawn of wisdom by the Downtown Eastside Christians was clear. According to those interviewed, wisdom is found in community, based in humility, and learned from unexpected others, including those that have little power in society and those who are dead. Experience and reflection are crucial to growing in wisdom– but the very best teachers are suffering and failure.

These themes show the richness of the wisdom culture that has grown in one of North America’s most notorious neighborhoods. It is a place where many have little to no physical, economic, political, or social power. Many, too, endure great hardship and suffering physically, emotionally, and spiritually. In such an environment, those who are powerless and suffering– and even suffering itself– become sources of deep wisdom. Every street corner and every incident becomes a place of growth and learning. The richness of these interviews themselves show the reality of how every neighborhood may contain perceptive prophets.

In the difficulty of the Downtown Eastside, people find wisdom and grounding in community. They also find insight in those long gone, in deep reflection on their experiences, and in slowing down. Most of all, people in the Downtown Eastside find wisdom through

humility. They take a humble learner's posture and discover wisdom from a multitude of teachers, often unexpected.

### *Further Research Directions*

The ideas expressed by participants in this study invite further exploration. The causes of the strong, unifying sense of community in the Downtown Eastside might be investigated. Moreover, it could be fruitful to look at how the concept of collective wisdom is understood not only in the Downtown Eastside, but also in more and less individualistic neighborhoods in and beyond Vancouver. The concept of collective wisdom might also further encourage and refine certain methodological approaches both in Biblical studies and sociology.

Finally, this initial study sought out people who others in the community considered wise, who turned out to be educated people with pastoral roles.<sup>28</sup> But these people highlighted how one should learn from those traditionally *not* considered wise, including those with significant struggles. This invites further research in seeking perspectives from those without a reputation from wisdom. Further research would want to examine the experiences and perspectives of those going through some of the "typical" issues that Downtown Eastside residents face.<sup>29</sup>

### *Pastoral Implications*

The insights of the participants in the Downtown Eastside provide crucial aides for both people in the community and outside of the community. First of all, they provide a crucial

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<sup>28</sup>None of this study's participants discussed experiencing lack of housing, drug addiction, or traumatic abuse, they advocated learning from those who did.

<sup>29</sup>This study highlighted themes that seem particularly applicable to those walking alongside people in addiction and poverty, not those experiencing these problems. Future research would want to explore what wisdom is available directly to the struggling. These questions were encouraged by a classmate, who, after I presented my initial findings, asked me, "What does this mean for those on the streets of the Downtown Eastside?"

reframing of the opportunity of suffering, a reframing that is deeply Biblical.<sup>30</sup> Secondly, they counter cultural lenses that narrow who the “wise” might be in any situation. This expands the field of who it might be “wise” to walk with. The “wise” in the Downtown Eastside include people in cycles of addiction, people with no education, and people in desperate life circumstances. The study’s participants advocate the power of reflection to grow in wisdom, and they encourage a humble, receptive posture that creates an opportunity for wisdom. Perhaps most importantly, they expand the “house” of wisdom from an individual to an entire community.

The six participants together have spent roughly 100 years engaged in the Downtown Eastside. They surely do not represent the full depth and breadth of how wisdom is understood. But their combined experience does provide helpful guidelines for reexamining familiar Biblical proverbs to see wisdom with a more expanded view. Their perspective might be particularly helpful for someone engaging in the Downtown Eastside for the first time, enabling them to be more open to receiving wisdom from the hurting and their own hurts. They also provide powerful correctives to the dangers of arrogance and isolation, and powerful motivators towards connection and relationships, as well as intentional reflection.

More broadly, the principles offered from the unique context of the Downtown Eastside are widely applicable in many communities. Listening to the voices often silenced, taking advantage of suffering, and searching out wisdom in collectives are transcultural ideas. Listening to the voices of past saints can be applied almost anywhere in the world, as can the dialogue of action and reflection.

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<sup>30</sup> James 1:2-4, Romans 8.17-18, 1 Peter 4:13, Romans 5:3-5.

The particular perspectives of wisdom garnered in the Downtown Eastside are actionable locally and may also be globally generalizable.<sup>31</sup> Just as Masenya's contextual reading of Proverbs 6 is applicable to South African farmers and New York real estate brokers, the Proverbial perspectives from the Downtown Eastside could aid local workers as well as communities globally that might face similar (or different) challenges.<sup>32</sup>

*Can anything good come from Nazareth?* Someone driving through the Downtown Eastside and witnessing the poverty, deprivation, and hardship might have a similar question. But on these cracked streets, a rich garden of wisdom is clearly being enjoyed.

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<sup>31</sup>While the Downtown Eastside is certainly a one-of-a-kind place with a unique culture, the themes that emerged in the interviews— reflection, humility, suffering, and learning from unlikely teachers— have universal application. Ekblad posits that despite his highly particular experience in leading Bible studies with gang members, campesinos, and illegal immigrants his insights about ways of reading might be helpful in a variety of contexts. The same may be true of these particular insights about wisdom. Ekblad, *Reading the Bible with the Damned*, xvii, xiv.

<sup>32</sup> These lessons might be especially refreshing in very different contexts, such as in wealthy, elite, individualistic communities where wisdom is narrowly viewed and success is seen as the antithesis of suffering.

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## Appendix A

### Semi-Structured Individual Interview Questions:

#### *On the Downtown Eastside*

- ~ How did you come to be in the Downtown Eastside?
- ~ What do you love about this community?

#### *Transition:*

Others in the DTES community have spoken of you as a person of wisdom. I am interested in hearing about your perceptions of wisdom and wise living.

#### *On defining wisdom*

- ~ How would you define wisdom?
- ~ How can you tell if someone is wise?
- ~ *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom – Proverbs 1:7.* How do you understand this Proverb? [What does it mean to you personally?]

#### *On growing in wisdom*

- ~ How do you think a person grows in wisdom?
  - ~ How did you grow in wisdom over the years?
- [Have you seen anyone in the DTES community growing in wisdom? If so, please explain.]
- ~ *Those who walk with the wise become wise. ~ Proverbs 13:20.* How do you understand this Proverb? [What does it mean to you personally?]

#### *On living wisely in the Downtown Eastside*

- ~ How do you think one can live wisely in the Downtown Eastside?
- ~ Who have you seen that has acted particularly wisely in this neighborhood?
- ~ *Listen! Wisdom is calling out. Reason is making herself heard.*

*On the hilltops near the road and at the crossroads she stands.*

*At the entrance to the city, beside the gates, she calls... Proverbs 8:1-3*

- Where do you see wisdom calling out in the DTES? How are people responding?
- ~ What advice would you give someone who recently moved here?

*Other:* Are there other Proverbs you have seen illustrated in your life or in the DTES?



## Focus Group Questions

### ***On defining wisdom***

- ~ How would you define wisdom?
- ~ *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom – Proverbs 1:7.* How do you understand this Proverb? [Have any of you experienced this personally?]

### ***On growing in wisdom***

- ~ How does a person grow in wisdom?
- ~ *Those who walk with the wise become wise. ~ Proverbs 13:20.* How do you understand this Proverb? [Have any of you experienced this personally?]

### ***On living wisely in the Downtown Eastside***

- ~ How do you think one can live wisely in the Downtown Eastside?
- ~ *Listen! Wisdom is calling out. Reason is making herself heard.  
On the hilltops near the road and at the crossroads she stands.  
At the entrance to the city, beside the gates, she calls... Proverbs 8:1-3*  
How do you understand this Proverb? [Have any of you experienced this personally?]

### ***On Proverbs***

- ~ Are there other Biblical Proverbs you have seen lived out (illustrated, at work) in the DTES?
- ~ What Proverb would you like to pass on to future generations in the Downtown Eastside?

## Appendix B



### Participant Information

Project Title	Downtown Eastside Wisdom: Perceptions of Wisdom and Biblical Proverbs in a Local Christian Community in Vancouver
Researcher Name	Sean Beckett

#### What is the project about?

We invite you to participate in a research project about how wisdom is understood by Christians in the Downtown Eastside (DTES), especially with regard to the Book of Proverbs.

#### Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been selected as someone who was recommended by someone else in the DTES as particularly wise.

#### Do I have to take part?

This information sheet has been written to help you decide if you would like to take part. It is up to you and you alone whether you wish to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be free to withdraw at any time without providing a reason, and with no negative consequences.

#### Are there any risks associated with taking part?

As you share your perspectives on these matters and the information is made available, others may disagree or take issue with your statements.

#### Are there any benefits associated with taking part?

By sharing your perspective, you may gain new insights or reinforce old insights. Your perspective may be valuable to the researcher, other participants, and to those viewing the research.

#### What precautions will you take to help protect me from the coronavirus?

The researcher has been vaccinated with two booster shots.

### Informed consent

It is important that you are able to give your informed consent before taking part in this study and you will have the opportunity to ask any questions in relation to the research before you provide your consent.

### What information about me or recordings of me ('my data') will you be collecting?

I will collect your name, your history in the Downtown Eastside, and opinions on questions about wisdom. I will record your responses via audio.

### How will my data be securely stored, who will have access to it?

The data will be stored on my computer. I will have access to it, as well as my professors, fellow cohort in class, and my immediate family including my mother. If you want your data to be anonymous, we will remove your name from all academic and published material.

### How will my data be used, and in what form will it be shared further?

Your research data will be used as part of this research project and potentially as part of art, research projects, or academic pieces in the future. In conjunction with you and the other participants, ways of using the research to benefit the community will be discussed.

It is expected that the project to which this research relates will be completed and submitted to Regent College for grading by December 2023.

### Where can I find out about the results of the study?

The finished project will be provided to you in written form, including a transcript of your interview.

### Will my participation be confidential?

No, your participation will be a matter of public record through the research project and possible community or art presentations. However, your data can be made anonymous by removing your name from the data.

You will be able to withdraw your data before November 19, 2023.

### Use of your personal data for research and data protection rights

If you have further questions about your rights regarding your data and its use in research projects such as this one, please visit

- The Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans ([https://ethics.gc.ca/eng/policy-politique\\_tcps2-eptc2\\_2018.html](https://ethics.gc.ca/eng/policy-politique_tcps2-eptc2_2018.html))

- The Personal Information Protection and Electronics Documents Act (<https://www.priv.gc.ca/en/privacy-topics/privacy-laws-in-canada/the-personal-information-protection-and-electronic-documents-act-pipeda/>)

### Ethical Approvals

This research proposal has been scrutinized and subsequently granted ethical approval by Regent College's Research Ethics Committee.

### What should I do if I have concerns about this study?

In the first instance, you are encouraged to raise your concerns with the researcher. However, if you do not feel comfortable doing so, then you should contact my Supervisor (contact details below) or the Chair of the Regent College Research Ethics Committee (James Smoker, registrar@regent-college.edu).

### Contact details

**Researcher** Sean Beckett

**Supervisor** Rhonda McEwen & Diane Stinton  
rmcewen@regent-college.edu;  
dstinton@regent-college.edu



Project Title	Downtown Eastside Wisdom
Researcher Name	Sean Beckett

Regent College attaches high priority to the ethical conduct of research. Please consider the following points before signing this form. Your signature confirms that you are willing to participate in this study. Signing this form, however, does not commit you to anything you do not wish to do and you are free to withdraw your participation at any time.

**Please initial box to the right.**

I understand the contents of the Participant Information Sheet (attached)	
I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project and have had them answered satisfactorily.	
I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time without giving an explanation and with no disbenefit.	
I understand the precautions that will be in place to reduce the risk of coronavirus or infectious disease and how I can help reduce this risk	
I understand who will have access to my data, how it will be stored, in what form it will be shared, and what will happen to it at the end of the study.	
I understand that I will be able to withdraw my data before November 19, 2023, and I understand that if my data has been anonymized it cannot be withdrawn.	
I agree to being quoted directly with my name in research publications.	
I agree to take part in the above study.	

**Regarding audio recordings**

I understand that part of this research involves recording audio.

Audio and visual data can be a valuable resource for future studies and therefore we ask for your additional consent to maintain this data for this purpose.

I agree to to being audio recorded.	
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I agree to my audio material to be published as part of this research.	
I give permission for my audio to be used in future studies without further consultation.	

**I confirm that I am willing to take part in this research**

	<b>Print Name</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Signature</b>
Participant			
Researcher			