

# THE MONTRÉAL LAY READERS' NEWSLETTER INFOLETTRE DES LECTEURS LAÏCS DE MONTRÉAL

## *A Word from your Editor*

by Michel Gagnon  
Vice-president Communications

*Version française à la page 2.*

Welcome to this newsletter, which is my last issue as Editor.

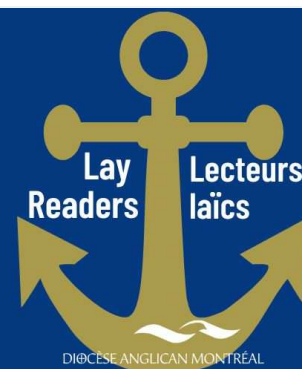
This issue is short, but packed with interesting articles. Our Warden Grace starts by reminding us that, in these troubled times, Lay Readers play a very important role in our parishes and society. We are—hopefully— living examples of how the Word of God can have a positive influence in our society.

But to be able to be such examples, we need reflection, prayer and meditation, as Karen reminds us. And Guy also shows us that our path as Lay Readers, or dare I say, our path as disciples of God is made of a lot of coincidences (i.e. “God-incidents”) that make us who we are.

And on that subject, let me remind you of our **Lay Readers’ retreat** from **Friday April 25 to Sunday April 27, 2025**. As we often hear, “God help those who help themselves”. While it may not be the best theological way to express our faith in God, being in a suitable environment is certainly conducive to hearing and listening to God. And this year’s retreat on ***Our Pilgrimage of Life in the Shadows*** with Dr. Jeff Crittenden will be equipping us to be better stewards of God in today’s society. More details on the last pages of this newsletter.

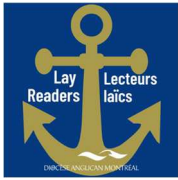
And speaking of being better equipped, our Annual General Meeting will be on **Saturday May 24 (AM)**. Not only will we have food for the body, but we will have a short presentation by Rev. Rodney Clark, followed by our annual meeting. Apart from electing officers for next year, i.e. finding fresh blood, this is the perfect time to talk about your needs and your preoccupations and to make sure that *your* association helps you become better, more effective Lay Readers.

And may Christ be with you in your ministry and in your lives. Amen.



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## ***Mot de votre éditeur en chef***

**par Michel Gagnon**  
**Vice-président aux communications**

*English version on page 1.*

Bienvenue à cette infolettre, ma dernière en tant que rédacteur en chef.

Ce numéro est court, mais rempli d'articles intéressants. Notre responsable Grace débute en nous rappelant qu'en ces temps troublés, les lectrices et les lecteurs laïcs jouent un rôle très important dans nos paroisses et dans la société. Nous sommes – espérons-le – des exemples vivants de la manière dont la Parole de Dieu peut avoir une influence positive sur notre société.

Mais pour pouvoir être de tels exemples, nous avons besoin de réflexion, de prière et de méditation, comme nous le rappelle Karen. Guy nous montre également que notre chemin en tant que lecteurs laïcs, ou, si j'ose dire, notre périple en tant que disciples de Dieu, est fait d'un grand nombre de coïncidences (ou « d'incidents divins ») qui font de nous ce que nous sommes.

À ce propos, permettez-moi de vous rappeler **la retraite des lecteurs laïcs du vendredi 25 au dimanche 27 avril 2025**. Comme nous l'entendons souvent, « Dieu aide ceux qui s'aident eux-mêmes ». Même si ce n'est pas la meilleure façon théologique d'exprimer notre foi en Dieu, le fait d'être dans un environnement approprié nous aide à l'entendre et surtout à l'écouter. Et la retraite de cette année sur **Notre pèlerinage de vie dans l'ombre avec le D<sup>r</sup> Jeff Crittenden** nous donnera les moyens d'être de meilleurs ambassadeurs de Dieu dans la société d'aujourd'hui. Vous trouverez d'ailleurs plus de détails dans les dernières pages de ce bulletin.

Et à propos de mieux s'équiper, notre assemblée générale annuelle aura lieu **le samedi 24 mai** en avant-midi. Non seulement nous aurons de la nourriture pour le corps, mais nous aurons une courte présentation par le révérend Rodney Clark, suivie de notre assemblée annuelle. Outre l'élection des responsables pour l'année prochaine, c'est le moment idéal pour discuter de vos besoins et de vos préoccupations et ainsi vous assurer que *votre* association vous aide à devenir des lecteurs laïcs meilleurs et plus efficaces.

Que le Christ soit avec vous dans votre ministère et tout au long de votre vie. Amen.

## *The Warden's Column*

**By Rev. Grace Pritchard Burson**  
**Warden of Lay Readers**

*Version française à la page 4.*

It's a scary time for the world, and a scary time for the church. I don't need to rehash the litany of alarming things going on in the United States and beyond; most of us are all too well aware of them. And sadly, many people professing to be Christians are actually espousing a set of values and priorities that are diametrically opposed to the gospel of Jesus Christ—describing empathy as a “sin”, claiming that Jesus told us to love our families and ignore the needs of others, and many similar blasphemous and heretical claims.



*Credit: All Saints by the Lake*

On January 21, Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington, DC, made headlines for a sermon in which she asked President Donald Trump to have mercy on immigrants, trans people, and other populations being directly targeted by his administration. As a result, she received a worldwide outpouring of both praise and condemnation. For many people, it came as a complete surprise that there were Christians who would speak out on behalf of the marginalized.

In Québec, society has been actively post-Christian for at least a generation, and many people are hostile to the whole idea of organized religion. But there are still those who have no idea that a more progressive, inclusive concept of church exists, and who might be interested if they did.

The current crisis, with its resurgence of authoritarianism, rollbacks of civil rights, and perversions of our faith, is distressing on many levels. But it does give us the opportunity to be more articulate about our faith, and more intentional in explaining to others what we believe. We can root ourselves in what we have always known to be true—that Jesus Christ is always on the side of the poor, oppressed, and powerless.

As Lay Readers, you have the opportunity not only to practice this, but to intentionally model and lead it for the members of your congregation. What can you do to help people to be more articulate in their faith in the face of these false prophets? The world is hungry for the news of a gospel that uplifts refugees, LGBTQ+ people, the disabled, the homeless, and many others in need.

We Anglican insiders know that Bishop Budde's sermon was utterly routine in terms of preaching and teaching in our tradition. But the world is only just becoming aware of this. May we be among those telling this good news!

In God's peace,

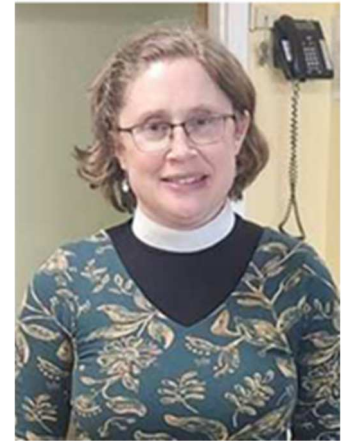
Grace+

## Le mot de la responsable

par la rév. Grace Pritchard Burson  
Responsable des lectrices et des lecteurs laïcs

*English version on page 3.*

Le monde traverse une période effrayante, tout comme l'Église. Je n'ai pas besoin de rappeler la série d'événements alarmants qui se déroulent aux États-Unis et ailleurs. La plupart d'entre nous n'en sont que trop conscients. Et malheureusement, de nombreuses personnes qui se disent chrétiennes épousent en fait un ensemble de valeurs et de priorités diamétralement opposées à l'Évangile de Jésus-Christ, en décrivant l'empathie comme un « péché », en affirmant que Jésus nous a dit d'aimer notre famille et d'ignorer les besoins des autres, et en effectuant bien d'autres affirmations blasphématoires et hérétiques du même acabit.



*Credit : All Saints by the Lake*

Le 21 janvier dernier, l'évêque Mariann Edgar Budde du diocèse épiscopal de Washington (DC) a fait la manchette pour un sermon dans lequel elle demandait au président Donald Trump d'avoir de la miséricorde envers les immigrés, les personnes transgenres et les autres populations directement visées par son administration. Suite à cette prestation, elle a reçu un déferlement mondial de louanges et de condamnations. Pour beaucoup de gens, c'était une surprise totale qu'il y ait des chrétiens qui s'expriment au nom des personnes marginalisées.

Au Québec, la société est activement post-chrétienne depuis plus d'une génération, et de nombreuses personnes sont hostiles à l'idée même de la religion organisée. Mais il y a encore des gens qui n'ont aucune idée de l'existence d'un concept d'Église plus progressiste et inclusif, et qui pourraient être intéressés si seulement ils en avaient connaissance.

La crise actuelle, avec sa résurgence de l'autoritarisme, ses reculs en matière de droits civils et ses perversions de notre foi, est affligeante à bien des égards. Mais elle nous donne l'occasion de mieux exprimer notre foi et d'expliquer aux autres ce en quoi nous croyons. Nous pouvons nous enraciner dans ce que nous avons toujours su être vrai, à savoir que Jésus-Christ est toujours du côté des pauvres, des opprimés et des impuissants.

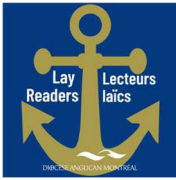
En tant que lectrices et lecteurs laïcs, vous avez l'occasion non seulement de pratiquer cela, mais aussi d'en donner l'exemple et de le diriger intentionnellement pour les membres de votre congrégation. Que pouvez-vous faire pour aider les gens à mieux exprimer leur foi face à ces faux prophètes ? Le monde a faim de la nouvelle d'un Évangile qui élève les réfugiés, les personnes LGBTQ+, les handicapés, les sans-abri et bien d'autres individus dans le besoin.

Nous, initiés à l'Anglicanisme, savons que le sermon de l'évêque Budde était tout ce qu'il y a de plus habituel en termes de prédication et d'enseignement dans notre tradition. Mais le monde commence à peine à s'en rendre compte.

Puissions-nous faire partie de ceux qui annoncent cette bonne nouvelle !

Avec la paix de Dieu,

Grace+.



## ***The Anticipation of Blessing and the Power of “the Amen”.***

**by Karen Birkett**  
**Treasurer of the Lay Readers' Association**

As we enter the Lenten Season many of us have chosen personal ways of focusing on what Lent means for us as individuals, corporately, and universally. Our practices may be as simple as giving up something, taking on an additional task, attending a Quiet Day or workshop, or going on Retreat.

At this time in the church calendar we try to find ways of being still or perhaps seeking a new path of approach to the Lord in Prayer, or we may choose to find additional ways of reaching out to others in need. Ash Wednesday services may bring to us broader questions regarding our faith, our capacity to embrace a Gospel that at times may seem controversial, and we may look at our lives and see areas that require of us a letting go of how we have lived in the past, to discover a new way of living in relationship with God, with a God who longs to bless and bring us wholeness.

In recent times I have really been focusing on the Power of Blessing in our lives and what this means in regards to our Lenten journey. How do we embrace this time of reflection, penitence, and renewal within this capacity? What does it mean for us to truly bless others and to seal our blessings with an AMEN? What does it mean to show love in this way?

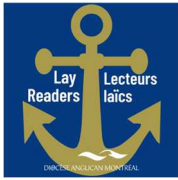
In the words of Bishop Desmond Tutu, from his book *An African Prayer Book*, Desmond describes that our relationship with God is a love affair, and Julian of Norwich describes prayer as a yearning, beseeching, and a beholding. Each knew the intimacy that enables us to know that we are loved with a love that will never let us go. Knowing this, how do we allow that love to fill our hearts in such a way that it changes who we are in relation to others and our personal journey with the Lord?

When we include an AMEN in our prayer and respond with an “AMEN” to another’s prayer or blessing, the “AMEN” is an act of faith that seals our request. It stands as an agreement to what has just been said as well as acknowledging God’s authority, wisdom and power over all events in our lives. The “AMEN” that seals our blessing or prayer also has the power to bless.

“AMEN” was first used by the Jewish people and according to Jewish understanding, when one utters AMEN, one should have in mind that God’s ministering angels also hear the AMEN and respond with their “AMEN.” Our AMENS should always be intentional and be understood as a form of praise offered up to God. Within Judaism, reciting “AMEN” with true intention has the power to open the gates of Heaven for any person, even a sinner, but it was also understood by the ancient world that the spoken word had the power to carry a blessing or a curse, and how important it was to understand how the universe would respond to that spoken word.

Sometimes we don’t realize how our words and our thoughts can truly affect the outcome of those around us and the world that we live in.

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## ***The Anticipation of Blessing and the Power of “the Amen”.*** (continued)

When I was asked to submit a short article for the Lay Reader Newsletter, I had no idea what subject I would focus on but the Lord gave me the title above and I was not quite sure how to express, in such a short article, the “immensity” of the spoken word, and the power behind it. A blessing and the anticipation of what that blessing will bring comes with great universal energy. “AMEN,” “So be it” or “Let it be so,” invites God to respond and brings an expectancy and a Holy space for God to embrace our request.

The spoken blessing is life-giving and has creative power. At the end of our worship services we hear the words of blessing, pronounced by the priest, asking that each of us be blessed in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This is a powerful blessing sealed with a powerful “AMEN.”

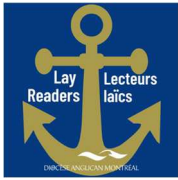
In our busy lives we sometimes move on too quickly to the next appointment, the next event or perhaps even the next prayer without taking a moment to reflect on the power of the blessing/prayer that has just been spoken. Sometimes we also say “AMEN” too quickly so we are not able to absorb the immensity of a spoken blessing or prayer. How important would be the slightest pause, to breathe deeply, to drink deeply, and express gratitude in that situation?

And when God gave words of blessing to the Hebrew people, he did so by passing those words onto Aaron with what became known as the Aaronic Blessing. There are slightly different translations to this blessing that we know so well from Numbers 6:22-27: “May The Lord bless and keep you. May the Lord let His light shine upon you. May the Lord be gracious unto you and grant you his Peace (His Shalom).”

A blessing of total well-being. As we hear these words and hold them close to our hearts, they will have the power to bring release, and to comfort, to bring healing and joy, and to bring abundance into the lives of millions, and as we add our “AMEN,” we can also offer a word of gratitude.

The Lord asks us to bless each other, **and often**, and each time we do so, and seal our blessing with an AMEN, the angels in Heaven respond and offer their AMEN as well.

May each of us offer to the world and to each other God’s greatest blessing sealed with an AMEN. May the 2025 calendar year find us open to receiving and giving many blessings to each other, to all of creation, to the world, and especially to the Divine. The power of our blessings can change lives, the world that we live in, and the journey that we travel.



## *One Person's Path to Becoming a Lay Reader*

**by Guy Grolimond**

**Member of the Executive of the Lay Readers' Association**

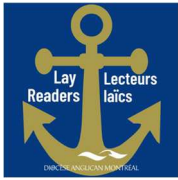
I grew up with my siblings on the north shore in Rosemère, where our mother insisted we attend church faithfully alongside her. It began with Sunday school—a simple start—then moved to confirmation, complete with semi-formal classes that gathered us all together. At home, Mom would occasionally coax us into listening to Bible stories, her gentle persistence planting seeds. Faith popped up now and then in conversations with neighborhood kids, basic exchanges that revealed how each of us saw God differently, shaping an early sense that our relationship with Him is as unique as we are.

But around 13 or 14, I stepped away from church for nearly 20 years. It wasn't unusual—many I knew didn't go, and as a teenager, there were always more exciting things to chase. Having been confirmed, I felt a newfound freedom to choose, trusting I could return if I wanted. Life pulled me in different directions: school took me away from home, then back, then away again—out west for a stretch, even to Geneva for a time—before I landed in Montreal at 35, studying Biology at university. There, I hit a wall. Physics, math, and chemistry overwhelmed me, and I struggled to keep up. I needed something beyond textbooks, a way to connect with people in a meaningful, unforced way. Mom, still steady in her faith, suggested I join her Bible study nearby. It sounded simple enough, and the discussions—sometimes lively, often thought-provoking—gave me a focus that balanced the grind of academia.

That choice opened doors I hadn't expected. I began attending St. Matthew's Anglican on Somerled in NDG, near my place, and soon a Bible study friend nudged me toward a Bible Fellowship downtown—a group of university students led by a mix of young leaders, some with families of their own. Then, out of the blue, missionaries from JCLS knocked on my apartment door (thanks to a Mormon janitor, I later learned). They invited me to pray, study the Book of Mormon, and consider it with an open heart. These groups weren't all about religion—there were social threads too—but they offered a safe harbor. After about a year with JCLS, I asked to be removed from their membership; a year later, I drifted from the Bible Fellowship, feeling out of step with its younger crowd. Through it all, St. Matthew's remained my anchor. It was there that Priest Peter Asbil suggested I take Lay Reader courses with Rev. Jan Djikman at what was once St. James the Apostle, now St. Jax, downtown. Months of evening sessions followed—learning about the Church, crafting sermons, speaking to a room without shrinking. Then came convocation, a milestone launching us into a year of practice: reading scripture, assisting with communion, carrying the chalice to those outstretched hands. Every so often, I'd preach, my reserved nature wrestling with nerves that sometimes tangled my words mid-sentence—a humbling nudge to prepare more deeply.

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## ***One Person's Path to Becoming a Lay Reader***

*(continued)*

Those early days weren't without stumbles. Leading Morning Prayer could feel daunting; I'd lose my place, repeat myself, or falter under the weight of my own shy hesitation. Once, friends came to hear me preach, and I unknowingly shuffled my pages—mid-sermon, I was adrift, embarrassed beyond measure. Yet I pressed on, and they later shrugged it off: "No one knew what you meant to say anyway." Their grace carried me through. After that probation year, we returned for our scarves—some handed down from retired lay readers, a quiet tether to those who'd gone before. St. Matthew's soon knit closer ties with other parishes, and I'd occasionally lead services or preach across them as we all fought to keep our congregations alive in a thinning Diocese. Some churches closed; a few members trickled to us, though St. Matthew's began to fade too. Eventually, we merged with St. Thomas', where three lay readers became two—Norm Starkey and me—plus one emeritus. Under priests like Karla Holmes and now interim Geert-Jan Boudewijnse, Norm and I have been entrusted to lead Morning Prayer and preach regularly, a privilege that's stretched me beyond what I once thought possible.

Over the years, I've been asked to lead funeral services—usually for those I knew, though once it was a stranger from a familiar community, a thread that unexpectedly wove me back to faces from my teens. Leading Morning Prayer at old haunts has been a blessing too, a gentle echo of where I began. When Rev. Karla was with us, she urged Norm and me to serve beyond the pews. Norm visits a place I don't know, while I go to a seniors' residence, offering Evening Prayer to anyone who'll join. It's simple, but it matters.

Being a lay reader has drawn me into parish life more than I ever imagined—a blessing I didn't see coming. I've learned that nerves aren't always the enemy; they sharpen my focus, as long as they don't tip into anxiety. Standing before others has lost its sharp edge, though it can still stir me up or wear me down—sometimes both in the same breath. These 25 years have shown me the quiet strength of support, especially when I pause to thank those who offer it. Like the disciples scattered yet steadied after Christ's cross, I've found that faithfulness in small steps—however halting—can bear fruit. It's not always grand, but it's real, and it's enough.

## ***A Call Beyond the Familiar***

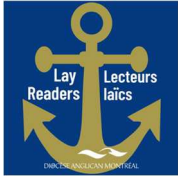
**by Guy Grolimond**

**Member of the Executive of the Lay Readers' Association**

I've always been the sort who sticks close to what's familiar, finding comfort in the known. But the COVID-19 years tested that, with precautions that sometimes felt overblown, even as the news of cases and deaths hit uncomfortably near. As a lay reader, that instinct to stay put held true—after my old church in NDG closed in 2011, I didn't seek out new places to serve. I stayed with St. Thomas', where routine suited me. Then came 2023. The world was opening up again in Montreal—masks were rare, reports of sickness quieter—and

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## *A Call Beyond the Familiar (continued)*

I'd grown weary of the old constraints, whether mandated or self-imposed. So when an email from Archdeacon Robert arrived, asking for someone to lead Morning Prayer at a small church in the Laurentians, it caught my eye. It was near Lac l'Achigan, where my parents built a home we still use—a spot not far off my beaten path. Years earlier, I'd missed a similar chance; this time, I wouldn't.

I replied swiftly, checking first with our priest at St. Thomas'. With two lay readers, and her steady, open-handed approach—letting Norm and me preach and lead regularly—she gave her blessing. Soon, the folks from the Laurentians church reached out. We settled on a date, using an order of service from a prior leader that summer. I slotted in the readings, and with their musician's help, we picked hymns. Morning Prayer is familiar ground for most lay readers—straightforward, yet it always carries weight.

The day arrived, and I drove up, arriving early at a secluded spot: a small white chapel beside a sprawling cemetery, framed by trees on three sides and the church lawn on the fourth. Quiet, lovely, with barely a car in sight. No one was there yet, so I sat in my car, reviewing the service and steadying myself after the drive. The warden arrived, unlocked the chapel, and we opened the windows to let the air sweep through. Parishioners trickled in, and though nerves tugged at me—as they always do in front of others—the service unfolded smoothly. Afterward, they were warm and grateful. I lingered briefly to chat, then headed to our family place at l'Achigan, feeling the day's quiet goodness settle in.

Encouraged, I reached out to the Kilkenny church folks, asking if they'd like me back in a few weeks. Their friendly "yes" surprised and cheered me. That second visit felt easier—many faces were familiar from the first time, and some names rang bells from my teenage years, tied to my brother's old friends from the area. Connections like that have a way of weaving the past into the present, unexpected and welcome.

Then came a third call: an interment the next month. I hesitated—I'd rarely done one—but our priest shared a general order of service, steadying my steps. The family, partly francophone, asked for some French, so I pieced together a rough paraphrase of my remarks. On a beautiful day, with the lawn and woods a deep green, we gathered around the burial spot for the ashes.

The stillness was striking. I spoke as loudly as I could, hoping all could hear, and kept it brief. The family appreciated it, and a couple others added kind words about the departed. Again, I reconnected with a few from years past, their welcome lingering with me. They invited me back anytime, though fall's demands pulled me elsewhere. Come spring or summer, when the chapel reopens, I'll likely return.

Looking back, those steps beyond my comfort felt like a small echo of the disciples venturing out after Jesus—uncertain, yet carried by a call. It wasn't grand, but it was real: a chance to serve, to remember, and to find familiar faces in unfamiliar places. That's enough to keep me open to the next nudge.

## RETRAITE ANNUELLE – DU VENDREDI 25 AU DIMANCHE 27 AVRIL 2025

### *Notre pèlerinage de vie dans l'ombre*

English version on page 11.

Au cours de cette retraite, notre animateur, **Dr Jeff Crittenden** explorera les thèmes clés du pèlerinage : dans la vie de notre communauté chrétienne, de la collectivité et peut-être la plus significative, dans la vie de notre âme remplie de la grâce du Dieu vivant. Tous ces thèmes seront abordés dans une atmosphère stimulante de présentations, de sessions en petits groupes, de retours d'expérience et de discussions en plénière.

Comme il l'écrit, « *le but de mes recherches et de mon enseignement est d'inspirer et d'encourager les fidèles dans leur communauté de foi et au-delà de celle-ci, dans le domaine de la théologie pratique.* »



*Notre animateur,  
Jeff Crittenden  
(photo fournie)*

### **Notre animateur**

**Le rév. Dr Jeff Crittenden** a exercé un ministère paroissial pendant plus de 30 ans aux quatre coins du Canada et il est présentement ministre-prédicateur à l'église unie St. Andrews de Toronto. Il détient un doctorat en théologie (Ph.D.) et un autre en homilétique (D. Min.). Il est professeur adjoint en théologie pratique (pastorale) à l'Université Huron (à Western, London ON), directeur-fondateur du Centre de théologie pratique (Toronto) et directeur de pèlerinages. Il est également l'auteur du livre *Leisure Resurrected – Rekindling the Fire of Early Christian Communities*.

### **L'endroit**

La retraite se tient au manoir d'Youville, un endroit enchanteur, propice à la réflexion et à la prière, et situé à deux pas de Montréal.

***Nous aurons des groupes de discussion en français.***

### **Cela vous intéresse ?**

#### **Il est encore temps de vous inscrire !**

Remplissez sans tarder le coupon d'inscription pour réserver votre place et participer à cette retraite qui saura développer vos aptitudes à servir Dieu dans la société.

**Vous pouvez vous inscrire jusqu'au 15 avril, mais faites-le d'ici le 31 mars et profitez du rabais pour les inscriptions hâtives !**

## ANNUAL RETREAT – FRIDAY, APRIL 25 TO SUNDAY, APRIL 27, 2025

### *Our Pilgrimage of Life in the Shadows*

*Version française à la page 10.*

During this retreat, our facilitator, **Dr. Jeff Crittenden** will explore the key themes of pilgrimage: in the life of our Christian community, our community and perhaps most significantly, in the life of our soul filled with the grace of the living God. All these themes will be addressed in a stimulating atmosphere of presentations, breakout sessions, feedback and plenary discussions.

As he writes, *“the aim of my research and teaching is to inspire and encourage the faithful in their faith community and beyond, in the field of practical theology.”*



*Our speaker,  
Jeff Crittenden  
(photo supplied)*

### **Our leader**

**Rev. Dr. Jeff Crittenden** has served in congregational ministry for over thirty years throughout Canada, and is currently Preaching Minister at St. Andrews United Church in Toronto. Jeff holds doctoral degrees in Theology (Ph.D.) and Homiletics (D. Min.). He is an Assistant Professor in Practical (Pastoral) Theology at Huron University (at Western, London ON), the Founding Director of the Centre for Practical Theology (Toronto), pilgrimage leader, and the author of his 2023 book entitled *Leisure Resurrected – Rekindling the Fire of Early Christian Communities*.

### **Location**

The retreat will be held in the Manoir d'Youville, a lovely site, conducive to reflection and prayer, and very close to Montréal.

### **Interested?**

#### **You can still register!**

Don't delay! Fill in the registration form now to reserve your place and take part in this incredible retreat that will help develop your skill as a faithful minister of God in our society.

**You have until April 15 to register. But hurry and register by March 31, and take advantage of our early-bird discount!**