

## LETTERS

## Scrap the LRT

I agree with Robin Madger, "Let's kiss LRT goodbye" (Dec. 12). In Europe, they use solar-paneled buses. Often, they use a special designated lane, which can easily be changed if traffic patterns change. There is no need to dig up roads for years to build tracks. No fossil fuels, no CO2 emissions and the routes can easily be changed or diverted in case of an obstruction or accident. The technology is developing quickly and LRTs are becoming older technology. The City of Luxembourg just obtained 10 new Volvo electric buses. Maybe European countries know something that we don't know?  
*Steve Bernbaum, Waterdown*

## A better way

Rather than follow the advice of Gina Pappano, executive director of Investnow Inc. in her article, "Oil and gas sector divestment must be rejected" (Dec. 2), I would sooner urge investment in projects that sought a just transition from dependence on oil and gas for our future energy requirements. To persist in the former is simply to invite annihilation. My heart is set on the well being of the Earth for my children, my grandchildren and my great grandchildren. Thankfully, I am in a position to follow my heart, not my pocket book. Do you not know why the Earth's atmosphere is warming?  
*Don Brown, Hamilton*

## We need TAs

Ameil Joseph and Karen Robson make an excellent case for faculty unionization at McMaster University, "Mac faculty members need to unionize" (Dec. 3), based on the erosion of collegiality that the ongoing teaching assistant (TA) strike has laid bare. The strike has also exposed a serious decline in the university's commitment to the goals of teaching and learning. In the days before the strike, instructors were advised to change their courses to allow them to be completed without the TAs. This would mean not just cancelling tutorials, but also simply eliminating culminating assignments that would ordinarily be graded by TAs. As part of an effort to show that the strike wouldn't effect business as usual, this plan suggests that the achievement of learning objectives is secondary to the real goal of simply going and getting grades. It's important to note that TAs are also students. The university rationalizes limits on TA hours because this work is meant to "complement their academic experience without compromising their ability to focus on their studies and complete their degrees." The contradiction here is that students cannot focus on studies when they're stressed about how to pay for food.  
*Susie O'Brien, Hamilton*

## No need for article

Why does The Spectator feel a need to publish three pages on a convicted terrorist? The article almost appears as a love letter about this murderer. Wouldn't it have been nice to see "O Christmas Tree" on the front page—a tree of hope in a time of need or information urging people to get their flu vaccine? Wouldn't it be nice to celebrate Hamilton rather than make it look like one of the most dangerous cities in the world?  
*Suki Garson, Dundas*

## Buyer beware?

Federal Environment Minister Steven Guilbeault expressed concern about future development in the Greenbelt. He is worried there will be construction in lands prone to flooding. Premier Doug Ford responded that it is the builder's responsibility to ensure there is no development on flood plains. Does this mean that ultimately it is the responsibility of the homebuyer? It sounds to me like "buyer beware."  
*Hinda Levine, Hamilton*

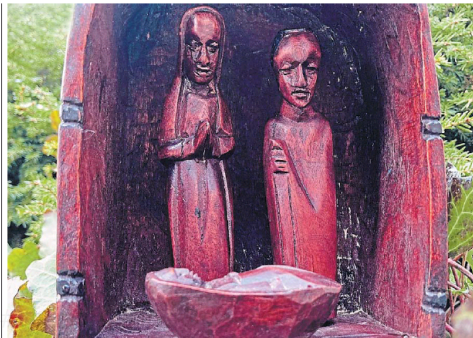
## Misogynistic platitudes

Regarding the letter "Interview went nowhere" (Dec. 21), I look forward to the letters to the editor, but this one may win "most offensive" of 2022. The writer describes NDP leader Marit Stiles as "newly anointed because no one else in her party wanted the job. Stiles, the young, pretty, good-humoured politician, bobbed and weaved around every question asked, and served up unconvincing, evasive platitudes." I'm sure Stiles is used to this treatment by "grumpy, ill-tempered old men," but in my humble opinion, it's 2022 and the writer should reconsider his misogynistic platitudes.  
*Gary Ellis*

## Deny services

Regarding, "Province grants builder's Winona housing wish" (Dec. 16). It should not be a surprise. Developers win most disputes taken to the provincial board. What compels the city to provide services to these developments? Is it possible for the city to require that these new building sites get their own water supply? The city should make the developers dispose of their own sewage by not connecting to city services. If the developers will not play by the current rules and regulations, why should the city?  
*John Stefanski, Binbrook*

LETTERS WELCOME: 250-WORD MAXIMUM, FULL NAME REQUIRED. SEND TO LETTERS@THESPEC.COM



The Nativity, the birth of Christ, is depicted in this wood carving from East Africa that's in the home of contributor Thomas Froese. Such art, writes Froese, is an expression of the universal nature of the Christmas message.

THOMAS FROESE

## Light still shines when you're alone



THOMAS FROESE  
OPINION

We get things wrong. This is to be expected. Because the problem with the church, the global body of Jesus followers, is that, like the larger world, it's filled with people.

We're not always our brother's or sister's, keeper. We don't always give a cup of cool water to the thirsty. A home to the homeless. We're not always peacemakers. Not always great image bearers. Not Jesus's best ambassadors.

American politics, which can dominate the news, seems like a circus where Christ's name is conveniently tossed around. Not that people of faith, any faith, shouldn't enter public life. They should.

But followers of "The Way," that is Jesus followers, or "Christians," (meaning "little anointed ones" as they were pejoratively called in ancient Rome when they were thrown to lions for sport) have, over the centuries, helped their communities best from a position of weakness, not power.

In broader culture it's also easy for people to get things wrong. One myth is that Christianity is essentially a white, Eurocentric faith. True, Christianity grew from the ancient Middle East into the larger

Roman empire. True, also, Jesus has been depicted, sometimes for artistic reasons, with skin lighter than a typical man from ancient Israel.

On the other hand, many ethnic groups have created iconography and meaningful images of Jesus in their own likeness, with very dark skin and their own particular racial features. Not because anyone believes Christ was born in, say, Japan. But because the joy of Christmas and its universal message of "Emmanuel, God with us," can be experienced by any race or people group.

In our own home at Christmas we have Nativity carvings from East Africa which, naturally, reflect life and artistic motifs from that region. And while in western Europe and North America it's currently in decline, Christianity is on the move in large swaths around the world.

In 1900, Africa had about 10 million Jesus followers. Now there are, incredibly, about 600 million. Latin America, South America and parts of Asia have similar makeups. China, where Mao's Cultural Revolution tried to shackle and leave the Christian God as a historic footnote, had four million Christians in 1949 when atheist Communist rule began. Now, including China's underground church, there are about 60 million.

Interestingly, while Jesus followers spread throughout the ancient

Roman world, thousands were killed because they refused to worship Rome's gods. But in the 20th century, more people were martyred globally for Christ than in all other centuries combined. All the more mystery, then, that the larger world is now somehow Christ's manger. Of course, the world is half a mess. Ever since Eden. Now we live with fears about not only war or disease, but survival of the planet itself. Then the everyday worries about money and relationships and health and whatever other wolf may prowl at your particular door.

But into this messy place, even into anyone's untidy private fears and anxieties and regrets — and hopes — the stab of Christmas light still shines. Especially in the cold darkness when you feel most alone.

"Don't be afraid. I'm with you. I'm on your side." The distinct message echoes from that first Christmas 2,000 years ago.

That's the history-altering event that's nothing like, say, the magazine cover at the supermarket checkout showing a shalmyalty Nativity like it's from some Hallmark movie. Rather, it's the event from ancient Palestine when, with a supporting cast, a brave teenage girl in the outback of Rome's empire gave birth in a simple cave while darkness raged nearby.

So for all that we may get wrong at this time of year, or any time of any year, for all that you, or I, may get wrong about Christmas, or our ourselves, or others, this is what's right: the word that became flesh, Jesus the God-man, is full of life and healing and peace and goodwill toward humanity. It seems like he just won't leave. Thankfully.

THOMAS FROESE WRITES ABOUT NEWS, TRAVEL AND LIFE FIND HIM AT THOMASFROESE.COM.

## Kids bombarded by brands online

MONIQUE POTVIN KENT

"tell me ur Halloween costume" This tweet was posted on Halloween by one of Canada's largest fast-food chains to their more than 168,000 Twitter followers. It was a follow-up to a tweet about a special meal deal for kids.

Given its style, spelling and request, what age group do you think it's targeting? There's only one answer of course — Canada's youth.

Such posts are not one-offs on a popular children's holiday. Our new study of Canadian social media in 2020 presents some alarming statistics.

The top 40 food and drink brands in food categories frequently targeted to children and adolescents in Canada tweeted a total of 30,294 times (more than 80 per day on average) with their tweets being seen an estimated 12.5 billion times. More than 99 per cent of these social media posts were from leading fast-food restaurants.

If you think kids aren't among that social media audience, consider that some research has shown that over 40 per cent of Canadian children under the age of four have a smartphone, and by age 15, the rate is 80 per cent.

As for using social media, a 2015 report found that one-third of children in grades 4-6 reported having a Facebook account, despite the age restrictions on the website. And 44 per cent of Ontario children reported using social media two to four hours a day, while 20 per cent re-

ported using social media for five or more hours per day.

These numbers may have actually increased since the research was conducted, particularly as the pandemic drove everyone to their digital devices.

Social media marketing campaigns rely heavily on encouraging people to create and share posts about brands with their networks through hashtags, competitions and other interactive features. This is called user-generated content and it is especially influential because messages come from trusted friends, family or role models.

In our study, which was funded by Heart and Stroke, we found that in just one year, the top 40 food and beverage brands in Canada were mentioned in user-generated content 116.9 million times in Canada on Twitter, Reddit, Tumblr and YouTube.

Tweets alone about the top 40 brands were potentially seen an estimated 491 billion times, with fast-food restaurants dominating, followed by sugary drink brands.

The inescapable conclusion is that our kids are being bombarded every day with enticements to consume unhealthy food and drinks.

Many kids are succumbing to the temptation, leading to poor dietary intake, health issues both now and later in life, and shortened life spans. The ubiquity of unhealthy food marketing on social media is hurting our kids and adding to the strains on our health system.

The current "wild west" of social

media marketing of unhealthy food and drinks needs to be reined in as part of the federal government's planned new regulations restricting marketing of such products to children under 13 years old. Quebec has had such restrictions in place for children under 13 since 1980.

The enactment of these restrictions is long overdue but if social media is not included, the regulations will lose a very large part of their effectiveness. Allowing such a loophole could be exploited by industry — and the onslaught of marketing on social media could actually increase as a result.

Youth are a captive audience on social media. The food and beverage industry knows this and are already devoting a large part of their marketing expenditures to online advertising.

We know from positive experiences in other jurisdictions, including Quebec, that restrictions on advertising to children works. But it is essential that regulations are comprehensive or the marketing bombardment will continue.

The federal government announced the Healthy Eating Strategy as one of its key commitments soon after it took office in 2015, but we are still waiting for these vital restrictions on unhealthy food marketing to be enacted. Since that time, entire hugely popular social media platforms have been born and now reach millions of Canadians, on top of the already popular platforms included in this research.

We urgently need enactment of these restrictions — and they must include social media.

DR. MONIQUE POTVIN KENT IS AN ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR IN THE SCHOOL OF EPIDEMIOLOGY AND PUBLIC HEALTH AT THE UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA AND IS THE PROGRAM DIRECTOR OF THE MASTER OF PUBLIC HEALTH PROGRAM.

