

**‘A Kind of Perseverance’:
Margaret Avison’s Poetry as Christian Witness**

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ABSTRACT

The twentieth-century Canadian poet Margaret Avison is known both for her complex and difficult ‘metaphysical’ poetry and her deep commitment to her Christian faith. The call to spiritual attention implicit in her lyrics is anchored in her interpretation of the mandate in scripture to be Christ’s witnesses. She invokes the same biblical texts as traditional apologists with their language of defence, but she gives less emphasis to the juridical metaphor typically framing the discussion and offers an alternative model of Christian witness, albeit indirectly, in her dual roles as witness and poet. In chapter two, connections are established between the two independent activities of witness and poetry. Then the authoritative precedent for witness in the scripture is considered, particularly in Second Isaiah 40-55, Luke’s Gospel and Acts, and The Gospel of John. Two Johannine metaphors—‘Come and see’ (Jn. 1.39) and ‘Go and tell’ (Jn. 20.17)—provide the basis for the paradigm of invitation that defines Avison’s body of poems. The poet invites her readers to look deeply and from odd angles with her into the books of nature and human nature, the subjects of chapters three and four, and the book of the scriptures, the subject of chapter five. She seeks and finds and points to the hidden God paradoxically revealed and concealed, particularly in the person of the risen Christ. Chapter six is the corresponding response of telling—revealing what she calls the ‘mix of the resurrection life and marred everyday living’ in yet more necessary ambiguity and complexity. Readers who respond with understanding recognize both the distinctive mystery of poetic witness and the inherent mystery in Christ’s saving work to which it points. Her poetry is ultimately a training ground for a thoughtful, reflective and persevering Christian faith. In turn, it is a model to the missionary church in its invitational presentation of the good news of Christ.