

**Rev. Dr. Catherine Faith MacLean**

**Ordained Minister**

**Nominated by Edmonton Presbytery (Alberta and Northwest Conference)**

### **Biographical Statement**

I am a theological pastor formed by CGIT and the New Curriculum, PEI summers and long novels, congregational rhythms of liturgy and experience, siblings and cousins laughing through stories of faith, and the nurturing of church and friends. My Dad was a minister in the Maritimes and Mum served with the church in Japan; Moderators and overseas personnel sat at our dining table. Currently, I am in a long-term pastorate with St. Paul's in Edmonton. I was ordained by the Maritime Conference and happily settled in the Restigouche Charge in northern New Brunswick. Calls took me to Yellowknife and Canmore, Alta. in the Rocky Mountains, before my present call.

My undergraduate degree from Dalhousie University in Halifax was in literature and languages. Harvard offered one of the few divinity schools with an interfaith setting in the 1980s, and I took courses offered by Wilfred Cantwell Smith, a United Church of Canada professor of world religions with a specialty in Islam. His teaching that we must examine religious traditions, and for that matter, persons, in their most constructive form became thematic for my practice of ministry. Twenty years later, I received a Doctor of Ministry in Preaching from McCormick in Chicago. My thesis explored the foundations of our faith: how what we believe gives rise to who we are, and shapes our action.

I have been listening and asking questions around and across the church. It is a privilege and a pleasure to accept invitations to listen and speak around the church, guest preaching from Whitehorse to the LaHave River in Nova Scotia, from Thunder Bay to Sherwood Park in Alberta, from Chalmers Kingston to Metropolitan Toronto, from Beaverlodge Alberta to an annual meeting of Toronto Conference. I've enjoyed offering keynote addresses for the AST Aitken Workshop on Preaching, reVITALize: Practical Theology Now, and Berwick Camp. Listening, I've been able to lead discussions about identity with ministers and leadership with university students and interfaith Pride. My recent writing has been published by *The Christian Century*, *Touchstone*, *These Days*, and *Gathering*. John H. Young and I wrote the book, *Preaching the Big Questions: Doctrine Isn't Dusty*. I travelled the country to write the Trinity chapter in the upcoming

textbook on United Church theology. I also had the pleasure of being a Guinness Book Official Witness for the Biggest Dodgeball Game in the World.

My wider church committee work includes General Council Theology and Faith, chairing the Edmonton Presbytery New Ministries Development Team, and planning reCall: Day Apart for Ministry Personnel in Alberta and Northwest Conference. I am president of the Canadian Theological Society, which hears and discusses emerging ideas annually during the Congress for the Humanities and Social Sciences. I was one of the people who brought *A Song of Faith* and *A New Creed* into our Basis of Union alongside the *Twenty Articles of Doctrine*. I have attended three General Council meetings, one as a Steward and twice as Commissioner, including Thunder Bay where we presented *A Song of Faith*, which I had a hand in writing.

### **Statement about the Church**

The United Church of Canada is a small church with a big backyard. This image comes true to me as I have been listening around and across the church these many years. In the particularities of our geographic locations and spiritual experiences, we hold much in common—personnel, ethics, hymns—and we hold much in unique, local, and theological expressions of the United Church—language, mystical experiences, times of worship.

It is a deep pleasure to travel the church and discover what the unique expressions are. It is as though we are cousins in faith. Our action unites us, a common drive for justice, fairness, and joy. In these recent years of restructuring, we have maintained and—more than that—energized our commitments to right relations, intercultural identity, and worshipping with soul. Our drive for social justice and honest, trusting relationships has deepened and grown.

Much of our exciting action happens because of function: we see something that needs to be done, and we do it. We do it to right wrongs, to ask forgiveness, to make good things happen. As church, we make things happen. And there is a liminal space between seeing a need for action and thinking the faith. It is experience of the living God, and shared experience of the movement of the Spirit. Talking the walk is one of the great joys of our spiritual lives.

My question for the immediate future is one of motivation. As a small church with a big backyard, having restructured our home to make it more convenient—having mowed the lawn, so to speak, torn down the time-worn walls and reset the shrubs—what will

keep us connected, keep us meeting neighbours, inspire us to open the doors and throw a ceilidh? Human energies wear thin, and we need the deep resources of Christ.

It's really a question of identity: a reflection on who we are, what we do, and who is our neighbour.

How big is our tent? Can Trinitarians and Unitarians share the same backyard? How do the understandings of the Creating God sit beside First Nations' understandings of the Creator? These are the kind of questions we have the opportunity to explore in upcoming years.

As Moderator, my spiritual leadership would be in good part asking: Why we are undertaking what we do, in whose name, and to benefit which neighbor? I am not interested in right doctrine. I am interested in robust conversations about the faith that underlies our work, and is the energy for our mission. Theological understandings change, and we benefit from leaning across our big backyard to ask how our cousins now understand our common life.

We will be coming to know each other differently in Regions, and in Denominational Council. Questions of anxiety and isolation still loom, although we will have new judicatories in which to voice them. When I moved to Yellowknife, I wanted to figure out a way to get to know the people upon whose land my church and home were built. I had studied languages, so I signed up to learn the local Dene language, Dogrib. During those winters under a sky full of northern lights, I learned about home and hospitality, and sharing stories in ways different from my own habits. As our many Regions in the United Church come to know each other differently, knowing how to set aside assumptions in order to love each other better—let alone work together—will take grace.

The world needs the church. It is not ours, it belongs to Christ, and that reassures me in the face of others' heartbreak and anxiety about resources, or property, or numbers. The world and our close neighbours need the beloved community of the church as allies, as partners, as friends. Friends seek to know one another more deeply. Here it is from *A Song of Faith*:

We sing of God's good news lived out,  
a church with purpose:  
faith nurtured and hearts comforted,  
gifts shared for the good of all,  
resistance to the forces that exploit and marginalize,

fierce love in the face of violence,  
human dignity defended,  
members of a community held and inspired by God,  
corrected and comforted,  
instrument of the loving Spirit of Christ,  
creation's mending.  
We sing of God's mission.

As a church with purpose, let's think about how we speak of ourselves—our identity—in these new days. How, for instance, are we facing what Linda Mercadante calls a “‘protest theology’ against an arid or distorted representation of God?”

The book *Preaching the Big Questions* came out of a theme address for Worship Matters. Difficult areas of life and theology are what John Young and I presented, and how those big questions can be discussed in sermons. People asked us to put the material into a book to serve the church. It has to do with talking the walk, and how talk informs where we walk and with whom. When we walk out of this big backyard, our neighbours ask us what we think about evil, or the concept of God, or why we bother with church when we can be good people without them. Bringing those questions into our daily life as a denomination is something I find fruitful, and I think it bears wide conversation.

As a spiritual leader in an Affirming Congregation, I am aware that our behaviour reflects concepts of God: the sacred among, within, and beyond us. I am aware that gentleness and public witness are both necessary. I am aware that public scrutiny leaves us vulnerable and courageous, rooted in tradition while singing a new song. We learn to love each other better, seeing and speaking the sacred among, within, and beyond us.

I am excited and honoured to be nominated to serve the United Church as Moderator. I hope my seasoned and proven leadership across the church will prove valuable as we share and enjoy this big backyard, our beloved community, in the present company of God, serving the world with insight and faith and love and joy.

