

Dr. Colin Phillips, Layperson
Nominated by Toronto Southeast Presbytery

Biographical Sketch

I am a native of London, Ont. My faith journey began when, as a rebellious teenager, I announced one Friday night that I was going to White Oaks United on Sunday morning. We had been to worship once or twice in the previous 15 years. I stayed at White Oaks until I started university, studying social work at the University of Waterloo. Emmanuel United welcomed me into their fold for those four years.

When I finished my BSW and moved to Toronto to do a MSW, I had every intention of going “church shopping.” Trinity St. Paul’s was the first stop on my tour, and there never was a second. A beloved member of the congregation died rather suddenly last fall. I couldn’t quite grasp why I was absolutely heartbroken. The answer was simple: he was—they are—my family.

In 2009, I discerned a call to serve the national church, and was subsequently appointed Member-at-Large for Youth and Young Adults on the Executives of the 40th and 41st General Councils. My two cascading GCE appointments were to the Permanent Committee for Programs for Mission and Ministry and the General Secretary’s Supervision Committee. I was Commissioner to GC41.

In 2011, I began my doctorate in policy studies at Ryerson University. My dissertation contextualizes Toronto’s policies to address homelessness in an era of government cutbacks and a decreasing social safety net. In other words, I study how empire’s current insistence that the free market can solve the world’s most complex problems hurts the most marginalized amongst us. Today, I teach various courses on social policy and anti-oppressive practice in the School of Social Work at Ryerson. Being a part of a school that has put the journey towards decolonization at the core of everything it does has shaped how I teach and live on these lands. Decolonization is a process of learning, unlearning, and critical reflection. As I read the *Calls to the Church* from the Caretakers of Our Indigenous Circle, I am filled with hope for our ever-unfolding transformation towards being a decolonizing church.

I try, not always successfully, to remember that how I transverse this world is shaped by my many privileges. At the same time, my travels are accomplished in a wheelchair and I communicate with a computer, or word board, because I was born with cerebral palsy. When a significant other’s footprints are next to mine, they are those of another man’s. For me, my disability and my queerness are simply parts of the diversity that is God’s creation. They certainly inform how I see the world, but I have never felt called to make them a focus of my work. I see honouring this as an act of resistance.

Teaching and writing consume much of my time, but I treasure my escape to the gym and my subscriptions to the orchestra and the opera. Being “Uncle C” to a four- and two-year-olds is the best job in the world.

Statement about the Church

All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved (*Acts 2:44-47*).

It is interesting to reflect on the earliest days of the church, as depicted in Acts, and to see them as both a reflection of where we are as the United Church today, and a blueprint for what we need to build. As it is with any community, those early folks had to deal with the questions of how they would be in the world—who would lead them, how would everything get done, and how would the community organize in a way that was true to Jesus’ teachings. These were all big questions, which were being answered amidst what must have been tremendous fear of an empire that was so threatened by their message that there were floggings, executions, and forced migration. Yet, despite all of this, there was an unflinching tenacity amongst them to keep on proclaiming the good news, to keep on healing, to keep on resisting. They could have given up, reason would argue that they probably should have, but they didn’t because they knew they couldn’t.

Today, we are also discerning how best to organize ourselves and complete the work that comes before us. Although our job in Oshawa, Ont. is to be the final eyes and hearts to look at decisions that have been made across the church, the heaviest lifting will come when we begin to live into these decisions in earnest. This will be a great deal of work that we all must attend to, bringing humility, our best listening skills, and a willingness to follow the Spirit wherever She may lead. There are undoubtedly people who ask, “why bother?” If this work were seen as an end unto itself, then *why bother* indeed. We know that this is not the case, though. As important as they are, these tasks only enable us to do our true work—the work we have no choice but to do.

Like we have since the earliest days, we are a church that lives surrounded by empire. Although the spread of liberal democracy has meant that Canadians can practice their faith without prosecution, the violence that empire perpetuates is as real as it was for Peter and John. Floggings have been replaced by paralyzing poverty. The modern guillotine is rising coastal waters, especially in the global south. Families are continually forced onto rickety boats, pawns

in the latest geopolitical manoeuvres. Our brothers and sisters in the Latin American church see this modern violence as a denial of the very personhood of its victims. The work of the church—the work that we can't help but to do—is being with the oppressed, dismantling the sources of violence, and unequivocally proclaiming that they are beloved children of God.

Now, none of this is earth shattering news to United Church folk. Indeed, putting forth a critique of empire that is rooted in our understanding of a loving and just God is one of our greatest strengths. There are also countless examples every week of how we care for children of God whose personhood has been denied. There is still a question before us, though: are we able to embrace the fact that the change we seek requires not just knowing God's will and individual acts of affirmation (as important as they are), but a willingness to be bold and stick our necks out to ensure that the Kingdom is realized? Are we willing to once again pick up that thread of unflinching tenacity that starts with the apostles, and runs through the Latin-American church and our own prairie heritage? I think we are.

The need to atone for our own complicity in empire and direct involvement in the genocidal colonial project, messaging from the broader society that our voice no longer matters, and concerns about how we will be in the world, have all meant that our voice has been diminished in the public square. The change we seek—the change God demands—means that this must change. It is time for us to reclaim evangelism, and actively disrupt its co-optation into a source of homophobia, patriarchy, and a rejection of the common good. True evangelism announces God's love for all, especially the poor, and sets out how to realize a commonwealth on earth.

Our renewed evangelism will take us to Parliament Hill and to Government House in Halifax, to contaminated soil in Grassy Narrows, and to tents of volunteers at the corner of Main and Hastings in Vancouver, who are just trying to keep their neighbours alive in the middle of a public health crisis. We will go into these spaces not as experts, but as partners who will tell stories of pain authentically, and visions of hope triumphantly. Our promise to our partners will be to stand with them humbly yet boldly, and with every ounce of our being.

An evangelical United Church that actively challenges the status quo will upset some. There will undoubtedly be cries for us to stick to charity and prayer, to accept things as they are, to deny the radicalness of God's love. Following the Christ who ate with prostitutes and tax collectors, and turned over tables in the temple, means that this passive voice simply isn't an option. Our message to the naysayers will simply be this: God needs us. This aching world needs us. Like those folks in Acts, empire will not deter us. A church that is tenacious in the public square is our calling. We have no choice but to answer.