

Rev. David JH Hart
Ordained Minister
Nominated by Halifax Presbytery

Biographical Statement

It is a deep privilege to be nominated as a candidate for Moderator of our beloved United Church of Canada. Allow me to share a few words by way of introduction to myself for GC43 Commissioners.

Autobiography is comprised of both an outer and an inner journey, both of which shape whom we become. At the age of five an event occurred in my outer life that was to shape my inner journey for years to come. Two older brothers drowned leaving me an only child. My parents were devastated! But they were people of deep faith, one to which they turned for meaning and consolation. It was understandable that I would do likewise.

Although I had a happy enough early life, the loss of my brothers elicited within me a deep spiritual yearning for God, for the relationship that would never leave nor disappoint. I studied theatre, English literature and philosophy at the University of Windsor in Ontario but, as a child of the 60's, my extra-curricular explorations of Eastern religion, meditation, and spirituality evoked my truest passions. When, during theological studies, my Conference Interview Board directed my attention to the Christian mystics, I discovered I had finally found home! And, I would say that the most important thing to know about me, aside from the external elements of my professional career in ministry, is that my life ever since has been characterized by a deep love for God and inner call to contemplative prayer. Additionally, the experience of mystical and contemplative prayer has shaped my entire understanding of Jesus, theology, and the church's call to engagement with the world.

Ordained by London Conference, I have served pastoral charges in Toronto, Saskatchewan, Northern, Ontario and Halifax. For six years, I served as the Minister for Personnel and Global Justice for Manitou Conference. Organizing exchanges with the South African Council of Churches during the closing years of apartheid, and later representing the United Church with Indigenous Mayan Presbyterian groups in Guatemala, opened my eyes to the wonderful work our church conducts with its partners around the world. I have sat on and/or chaired various committees, task forces and special assignments at all levels of organization in the United Church.

For many years, Bedford United Church (BUC) in Halifax, Nova Scotia, where I have served as team leader, has provided inspiration and vision for the wider church regarding future directions for enlivened congregational ministry. From modelling pro-active engagement with the culture around us as the first congregation in Nova Scotia to become "affirming," and recently honoured by the Government of Canada for building bridges with the Islamic community, to demonstrating what truly modern worship and theology can look like in today's world, BUC has always thrived on the cutting edge of congregational ministry.

Passionate about articulating a thoroughly contemporary theology for people both inside and outside the church, my congregation encouraged me to write, resulting in two books *Christianity: A New Look at Ancient Wisdom* and more recently, *Spirit Awakening: Finding New Life in Christian Faith*. I have a deep interest in the connections between contemporary science and faith, and derive much theological

inspiration from modern music. Married to Daniele, a lawyer with the federal government, and blessed with a daughter, Kinza, attending McGill University in Montreal, it is a privilege to stand with the other nominees as a candidate for Moderator.

Statement About the Church

As indicated in my statement above, the experience of contemplative prayer has profoundly shaped my understanding of the world in which we live and of the United Church through, which we serve. Contemplative prayer serves to deepen and enrich one's experience of the Sacred, not as some otherworldly Reality, but as very present in and guiding our lives here and now! This dimension of my life has enabled me to more deeply appreciate the profound currents of spiritual change presently flowing through our culture. We live in a time in which the sacred and the secular are no longer experienced as diametrically opposed to one other. Rather, everywhere, people are locating God, or the Sacred, here and now in their daily lives. Various theologians have noted that we are living on the cusp of what could be referred to as a second Reformation.

The challenge for the Church, including our United Church of Canada, is not that people no longer believe in God and therefore no longer attend church. Rather, the opposite is true. People everywhere believe strongly in God but fewer and fewer believe that the church has any special "corner on," or access to God. For growing numbers of people who call themselves "spiritual but not religious," the wider church often seems to pose a "barrier" to God rather than providing an "opening" to God.

Related to this shift is the currency people place on experience as distinct from belief. For decades, if not centuries, the church has invited people to subscribe to its beliefs about God. In today's world, people recognize the limitations and shortcomings associated with our human ideas about God. Rather, what people hunger for is experience of God. This experience can be found in a yoga class, a mindfulness meditation group, or working in a soup kitchen feeding the poor. But regardless of how it takes place, the wellbeing of the future church will depend upon its ability to facilitate meaningful spiritual experience for people in a wide variety of different ways.

The United Church presently is undergoing a major restructuring to accommodate to a new reality characterized by a much-reduced membership and influence in our Canadian culture. Less people, less money, less volunteers, and churches closing across the land, require us to find new ways to function and govern ourselves. This restructuring will take some time to unfold. We can trust in the multitude of wonderful leaders, employed and lay, working in administrative positions across the denomination, to manage it as effectively and transparently as possible... mind you, I would guess, not without a hiccup or two along the way!

But the very need to conduct this restructuring constitutes a wakeup call for the Church necessitating that we learn how to re-engage deeply with our culture about religion, faith, and Spirit. The good news is that we are extremely well positioned to do so. We have the infrastructure, resources, background and the depth to truly make a difference in Canadian life. The challenge before us is to discern Spirit's wisdom regarding how to do so.

I have my own personal observations and insights gleaned from 25 years of experience leading a dynamic and constantly evolving congregation, regarding how Spirit may be calling us to respond. For example, I personally believe we need to renew our encouragement for young people to enter ministry and to provide them with a much deeper level of spiritual formation and leadership training than we, to

date, have done. But this is just by way of saying that, in parallel with the organizational re-structuring presently occurring, our denomination needs to undergo another process of re-visioning how Spirit is calling us to be the United Church of Canada in this new age and circumstance. And the role of Moderator needs to serve the facilitation of that re-visioning, one that will engage the wisdom and experience of us all.

In keeping with the contemplative vision and experience that Spirit is present everywhere in and animating all of life, I trust that it is very much alive and present in our United Church of Canada. If we can open profoundly to its Presence and Wisdom, I trust that it will continue to have a very significant role for us to serve in the years ahead. Thanks be to God.