

Rev. Donalee Williams

Ordained Minister

Nominated by Yellowhead Presbytery (Alberta and Northwest Conference)

Biographical Statement

I am nine years old, upstairs in the manse where my Dad has his office. It's bulletin day. I am transfixed by the rhythmic sound of the hand-cranked Gestetner (old-school copier technology), smelling the tang of the ink smeared on his hands, and so wanting to be part of it, hoping I will be asked to fold them. Weaving through the mechanical noises, the sound of my mother's music from downstairs: a piano student, or the Junior Choir anthem we would soon practice for Sunday.

Who am I? Essentially, I am a storyteller, whether in writing, or speaking, or singing. Becoming a candidate for Moderator is definitely an unexpected twist in my story. But what a great opportunity to look backwards and forwards with faith!

At an early age I experienced church and belonging rooted in incarnation and delight. A daughter and granddaughter of ministers, daughter of a music teacher, and sometime choir director, a child of the manse, mostly in small-town southern Ontario, descendent of Scots and German immigrants, I was born into, and nurtured by, God and music and church—initially the Evangelical United Brethren (EUB), which became part of The United Church of Canada in 1968.

School, church, and music wove through my teenaged life. On my bedroom wall, a poster: "Be patient. God isn't finished with me yet." Then university, marriage, career, and much less time for church.

Baptism drew me back to regular attendance in my early 30s. My spouse, Ian, and I were expecting a baby. However, it was in exploring the meaning of my baptism in the following 15 years that I discerned a call to ministry, went back to school, left a career in radio news broadcasting, was ordained, and settled, and moved with Ian and our son, Gavin, from Mississauga, Ont., to Fort McMurray, Alta. And I discovered God's call is more persistent and expansive and liberating than I could imagine.

In ministry at Fort McMurray First United Church since 2010, I have discovered joy and beauty and delight, lament and challenge. God sent me here to love, and I have been stretched by the Spirit in ways I never imagined—learning to love others, creation, God, and myself.

The 2016 wildfire was one of those stretching experiences. In evacuation, exile, and return, we learned about terror and trauma, and about overflowing and abundant care and concern from

family, friend, and stranger. The words of our creed, “we are not alone,” were written on my heart as never before.

With my congregation I have worshiped in many and lively ways. Highlights include creating “pig swill” for a Messy Church exploration of the prodigal son, a pet blessing service that included a hedgehog, and the experience of grace in countless ways. Preaching is a deep joy of my vocation and also a strong element of my worship services. I took on a leadership role in the theologically diverse Wednesday Team at the local Baptist church soup kitchen. I have explored generous, inter-faith partnership as a founding member of the Collaboration for Religious Inclusion. Volunteering at the Golden Years Society by leading the enthusiastic G.Y.S. Singers has been a delight. I have been nurtured and given opportunities to serve in Yellowhead Presbytery and Alberta and Northwest Conference. I have been privileged to serve as a commissioner to GC41 and GC42, as the ANWC-ordered representative to the General Council Executive, on the national Nominations Committee, and as a facilitator for the Comprehensive Review.

For me, ministry is richest when I participate in ongoing traditions of service as well as open myself and others to explore something new together. I am doing theological reflection all the time in ministry, whether I’m showing up for interfaith events, reading pages of reports for General Council meetings, up to my elbows in “pig swill” at Messy Church, preparing sermons, creating puppet personalities for children’s time, or looking for the growing edge of God’s grace within me. For me, ministry is a combination of serious work and intentional play. And sometimes, serious work alone won’t get you there!

In all these stories, I have known joy, delight, and laughter amid the hard work and challenge, love and hope as a leader in this United Church of ours, and this world that God so loves.

Statement about the Church

The breath of life, the breath of creation, the breath of the Spirit: natural, intuitive, gift of joy and delight.

Babies know it; we see it in their belly breathing, and perhaps wonder when we stopped breathing that way.

The first singing lessons I took were both exciting and frustrating when it seemed my breath control had disappeared. However, I began to discover this was learning and re-claiming another way of breathing.

In these days of change, both recent, structural change, and decades of societal change, The United Church of Canada has an opportunity to discover, learn, and re-claim another way of breathing.

When was the last time you laughed, or played, or danced, or had fun in church? As well as praise and lament, and finding that quiet centre, surely these things also have a place when we gather as followers of Jesus who are Spirit-blown into the world, of which we are a part, into God who births all things and who, amazingly and wonderfully, desires to know and be known. I wonder how the United Church could engage intentional delight and play as a spiritual discipline. In Proverbs 8:30-31, Wisdom, the first act of creation, remembers being beside God like a master worker, or perhaps a darling child, being daily God's delight, rejoicing before God always, rejoicing in God's inhabited world, and delighting in the human race. I wonder how worship and work and intentional delight could be one.

Justice can also be rooted in Divine Delight. Delight-rooted justice bears the hope of reconciliation, sometimes as a twinkle in the eye, or as a banked hearth. Delight-rooted justice rolls up the sleeves, refusing to look, or turn away from, the hard work to which God calls us: continuing to live ever more deeply into right relationships, including the TRC Calls to Actions for the churches, digging into the work of being inter-cultural beyond the surface, getting into the messy work of ensuring our structure, our actions, and our words reflect our commitment to justice; engaging in awkward and courageous conversations about privilege: white privilege, male privilege, straight privilege, able-bodied privilege—those privileges that some of us can easily fail to examine, and that some of us are all too aware.

If approved, the restructuring of the United Church will eliminate presbyteries and Conferences. Even though it still will be "us" in the new governance model, we will be "us" in an unfamiliar way. And I wonder if we could think of ourselves as a church experiencing trauma. Many of the stories of our faith forbearers are rooted in trauma, including the great flood, the exile in Babylon and the return home, the death of Jesus, the birth and expansion of the early church. Scripture gifts us with stories of our faith ancestors who experienced being led, accompanied, and recreated by a faithful and loving God, the resurrected Christ, and the enlivening Spirit.

In the post-trauma reality after the Fort McMurray wildfire, one of the most important tools for recovery was breathing. When memories of trauma are triggered, being mindfully connected to breath helps to root us in the present.

In trauma, individuals respond in different ways, including paralysis, super-activity, denial, and anxiety. I wonder if we, as church, can see these responses in ourselves. What if we engaged this change as a new way of breathing? I wonder how we can perceive and live out the Spirit who is beginning to breathe us in a different way.

The Rev. Diane Strickland, a specialist in post-trauma work, has journeyed with Fort McMurray First United Church for the past two years, funded by the outpouring of generosity from our United Church family. And I lift up this wisdom she has often shared as wisdom for our church: after trauma, there are things you will never be able to do again. And there are also things you will be able to do that you never thought you could.

In experiencing trauma I have learned more than I ever thought I could: about the One who grounds me; about how laughter can suddenly sweep into the breathless gap of terror; about how a scattered community can hold on to one another and be held by an even wider community; about how, whether or not I become Moderator, I really know how to play.

I believe The United Church of Canada, as it has been so many times in our history, is on the edge of possibility that is filled with promise, justice, new life, joy, and delight.