

Rev. Susan Beaver
Ordained Minister
Nominated by Plains Presbytery (All Native Circle Conference)

Biographical statement

I am *Kanien'kehá:ka* from Six Nations of the Grand River Territory in Southern Ontario.

Growing up on the reserve, my mother taught me how important justice is to people of faith, and my father taught me awe and reverence for a seed that falls on the ground, or is placed there by hard-working hands. I grew up in community with a love for history, stories, and spirituality. I asked my uncle, "Why did they shorten our mourning period from one year to 10 days?" and he said, "Because Creator meant our lives to be joyful." He formed my faith that day.

At the same time, my life was not joyful. My father, whose blessing I pray for every day, is a survivor of two residential schools and raised his children the way they raised him—with violence and hard work. I spent many years traumatized with no framework for understanding what happened to me in my younger years.

After I left the reserve, I lived with the pain and barely lived at all. I came out to my mother and she exiled me from our community. I decided that it had to be worth it; that my life had to have meaning. My early years taught me suffering and I decided that I wanted a better world. Though wounded myself, I always worked in non-profit organizations serving women, queer, and Indigenous peoples.

I was free to experience life, and I never lost my love for spiritual life and stories. Spirit prepared me to meet my partner so that when we met, I recognized her. We've been together for 28 years. I had a dream about a polar bear and so got a job in the Yukon. I studied in an Indigenous creative writing program in B.C., went to Okanagan ceremony, sacred places, and had a profound experience of the divine. I majored in Religious Studies at a Buddhist university in Colorado where I meditated every day, went to synagogue, practiced Father Keating's centering prayer, and sat with Sufi dancers. I challenged the university's racism and privilege. While there, I truly learned to love God.

My partner and I moved back to Ontario and to my home church, Grand River United. I became a lay reader, got a job at the Francis Sandy Theological School, and began to hear my call to ministry. I served as Chair of Great Lakes Waterways Presbytery, on the Intercultural Ministries Task Group, and as commissioner at General Council.

When I committed to my call, I went to Emmanuel College and served as student minister at Grand River. Since ordination, I continue to serve on the Executive and Council of Learning for

both presbytery and Conference. I was a member of the Caretakers of Our Indigenous Circle. I'm on the Indigenous worship-planning circle for GC43. I've also been involved in the Indigenous portion of remit implementation and design. I maintain a relationship with Emmanuel College, who comes to Grand River every October.

Statement about the Church

Before I was called to ministry, I studied with Reb Zalman (may his memory be a blessing), a rabbi who endured an internment camp in France and could just as easily have gone to Auschwitz. He survived the war and afterwards, when he saw that the faith wasn't serving the (traumatized) people in ways that truly gave life to them, or deepened their relationship with God, he began a Jewish renewal movement. Reb Zalman was bursting with joy and love for God. He and his renewal movement are my inspiration for what faith means in our lives, and in the world.

Our church is at wonderful point of embracing change. At GC43, we may choose to restructure our current body, something not done to this degree since union. We have looked at ourselves and said, "This no longer serves us," which gives us the opportunity to say, "This is what gives us life." Through circumstances, God has asked us to change how we do business in very practical ways, like how we enter the candidacy path, or financially support the church. These changes also ask us to develop the culture of the church. We need to do things in new ways and there will be challenges as we seek to follow God's call for us. God's call is not the path of certainty or comfort. When we are uncertain, there is openness and room for Spirit to work in us. God's call is one of trust and faith. With the Risen Christ at our side, can we dig deep and find the new church's new way of being in the world?

If we accept the Caretakers of Our Indigenous Circle's proposal *Calls to the Church*, The United Church of Canada will be saying—to Jacques Cartier as he "explores," to Duncan Campbell Scott as he designs the residential schools and voices the desire to get rid of "the Indian problem," and to the author of the White Paper promoting Indigenous assimilation into western culture—"You were wrong. This is what a good and life-giving relationship with Indigenous people looks like. And we didn't have to think it up. The Indigenous people gave it to us because they, too, love God."

The church began saying this 30 years ago, but it is also finding its new voice as we design the new structure. I'm sad to say that I've witnessed just how excruciatingly painful it is when we try to work together. I've seen how normal Western culture is debilitating, alienating, and excludes Indigenous and other peoples. I've seen how little people know about us and how we do things and it's a shame because we, as Indigenous people, bring some amazing things to the table. We know that all work in the church can feel like the best worship service you've ever

experienced. It can hurt to walk away from a church meeting because we've created meaningful community and joyous fellowship. This is how we can do the work together and see what we create. This is the beginning of the transformation and the new creation.

We have heard that the church, the Body of Christ as we know it, is dying. Dying is life. If the Body of Christ is indeed dying, then we are all Nicodemus and we are all Joseph and Josephine of Arimathea. We are all lovingly and respectfully caring for that crucified body. We are all responsible for getting that body to the place it needs to be so the resurrection can happen. At GC43, we may well roll the stone over the tomb. And we may spend three difficult days, even a brutal Holy Saturday, waiting and praying for a new day. This is holy and faithful work, and that is okay.

The Body of Christ is only the Body of Christ if it lives and breathes, walks and works, and serves those who suffer in the world. In my ministry in the Indigenous context, I am surrounded by what seems to be endless suffering in the people. Our society denies the importance of a living wage while spending billions on world-killing pipelines. The U.S. President is making it safe again for White supremacists everywhere. We have much work to do. Someone has to hold up the story of another way, of the way that leads to life for all. There are as many ways to tell this story as there are people in our church today, and who may well be in our church tomorrow.

Now is the time to truly unleash and join with the many voices enlivened and inspired by a love for justice and for the people. A political analysis speaks the gospel. A commitment to learning and unlearning racism proclaims to the world that life is more powerful than death. Prayer tells us who we may be. At the end of the day, we should all be able to give thanks to our Creator for the work we've been given to do, and go to sleep knowing that we served God's wildest dream for the good of the world.

"The truth of the matter is, anyone who has faith in me will do the works I do—and greater works besides." (The Inclusive Bible, John 14:12)