

MODERATOR ACCOUNTABILITY REPORT

Origin: Moderator

Siblings in Christ,

What an honour it has been to serve The United Church of Canada as Moderator over the past three years. And what a Deep, Bold, and Daring time it has been. As we prepare to gather in Calgary and across the country to discern the work of the 45th General Council and elect our 45th Moderator, my prayers will be with the church that we might be faithful disciples in that work. This won't be a play by play accounting of my activities – but a faithful reflection of what I've heard and learned along the way in my journey as your 44th Moderator.

That All May Be One

This centennial year marks an important moment in the life and witness of our denomination. As we recognize both the good and hard things of our first hundred years, and the traditions that formed our denomination, we also turn to the future. And that is my hope for this General Council 45 meetings: Visions and Dreams.

While the initial 2022-2025 Strategic Plan was to focus and align the work of the General Council Office, the Call and Vision of the church is for the whole church.

Our Vision statement is: ***Called by God, as disciples of Jesus, The United Church of Canada seeks to be a bold, connected, evolving church of diverse, courageous, hope-filled communities united in deep spirituality, inspiring worship, and daring justice.***¹

And the resulting Call is that we are to be a church of **Deep Spirituality, Bold Discipleship, and Daring Justice.**

Now, more than ever, we need to wrestle with this call and vision at every level of the church. We will review during this General Council the impacts – both intended and unintended – of the restructuring of the church in 2018. But one thing is consistent that I've heard across the church: communities of faith feel untethered from the denomination, and there is a rise of congregationalism. That is not necessarily a good or a bad thing – it is just the thing that is happening, and in many ways it is understandable. And we come from congregationalist roots and perhaps it also shouldn't be surprising. But the motto of our church, which comes from the 17th chapter of the Gospel of John, is *ut omnes unum sint* (“That all may be one” in Latin) / *Akwe Nia'Tetewá:neren* (“All my relations” in Mohawk). We must not lose sight of that commitment to unity in our congregationalism.

I think we have an opportunity to really embody unity in our diversity. What does it mean for Lynn Valley United Church, or Hope Springs United Church, to be a deep, bold, and daring

¹ <https://united-church.ca/community-and-faith/welcome-united-church-canada/our-call-and-vision>

church? What are the gifts and contexts that are uniquely yours to be this expression of God's love and witness in the world? These six words have the power to shape our unity, even in the midst of upheaval, change, and an uncertain future. And so I continue to pray: *ut omnes unum sint*.

Deep Spirituality

As someone whose study and career has tilted to the "Daring Justice" side of our Call & Vision, I was most nervous about the parts of the role that required me to act as the elected spiritual leader of our denomination. In a meeting with our Global Partners circle early on in my time as Moderator, some of the feedback they gave to me and to the General Secretary was that The United Church of Canada is known – globally – for its daring justice. But she had a hard time hearing the deep spirituality of our denomination. I will talk more about Bold Discipleship in the next section, but I knew without thinking deeply about it that our spiritual side is there – it's just that we don't proclaim our faith publicly or corporately that often.

We can name theological concepts and justice issues, but our spiritual side we hold close to our hearts. I'm not sure why this is – maybe it comes from the cultural modesty imposed by Victorian ideas of what constituted "civilized" society over the past century and beyond in Canada. And maybe it's a reaction to the distasteful but increasingly strident voices of Christian nationalism both in Canada but especially in the USA. But that doesn't mean it doesn't exist. I know too many people in our church across time and space who pray, preach, and worship in ways that are deeply meaningful and rooted in the desire to celebrate God's presence among us.

And I can feel it in the many communities of faith I have visited over the past three years. We have deeply talented liturgists, and active prayer lists. We have myriad contemplative practices, and embodied ways of experiencing the presence of the divine in God's created order.



My own spirituality has been deeply enriched by this experience. In particular, I have felt a renewed sense of call to the ministry of word, sacrament and pastoral care. The invitation to preside at communion, but especially to serve communion, in many worship services across the country has filled my spiritual cup in ways that I did not anticipate. And I am deeply grateful for it.

Quite often I preach a sermon alongside the Flourishing workshops that I've co-facilitated in regions across the church that we could just call "Alive is Beautiful." In that sermon, I share:

I've been reading the work of Andrew Root lately – he's a minister and professor of youth and family ministry at Luther Seminary in Minnesota. He's taken the work of Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor – specifically his very highly regarded study of secularism – and marrying that with a contextual study of the church. The book I've been reading is *Churches and the Crisis of Decline*, but he has a book that's geared towards the church rather than the academy called *When Church Stops Working*.

I think Professor Root is right on the money with his idea that we are so radically assaulted by secularism all the time, that the church has stopped living. He talks about two kinds of death – both tragic: one because someone or something's life is cut short, leaving so much potential. We see this in the tragedy of unexpected loss of someone we love, but I think it's also true when organizations do this too – and Canada is famous for this kind of death. Health columnist for the Globe and Mail, André Picard, said once at a conference I attended that Canada is the land of pilot projects. We come up with innovative programs to address our needs, report on their success, then revert to the status quo because “that was just a pilot project.” Then Scandinavian countries read our pilot project reports, say “Hey! That worked in Canada...” implement our programs as public policy, and we sit here looking over to Scandinavia with envy and the robustness of their social foundations. It's a little crazy making, right?

The other kind of death, though, he says, is when a person or a people stop living. He says, “their absence... becomes a deeply uncomfortable awareness that one can live a life without truly living at all. We grieve not because this person is absent from the orchestra of life but because this person stopped playing a long time ago.” We have all encountered people – and organizations – like that, right?

This is where he gets into the idea of secularism and its impact on the church. Charles Taylor has three different definitions of secularism: 1) it means the divide between the public and the private – like when we sell a church building to an art gallery or a music school or to a restaurant or pub; 2) that secular is defined by fewer and fewer people committing to religion, to the extent that our churches become so empty that they can be converted to the art galleries or music schools or pubs in the first form; and 3) secularism means that we live in a world where all belief is contested and fragile. That “we live in a secular age because we can imagine living, and at times do live, as though there is no transcendent quality to life at all.” (Root, p. 8)

Root says “Most of us in the West... can live our lives as if there is no living God who enters into history and speaks to persons. Westerners hold onto the *idea* of God (most of us *believe* in God...) but few of us are sure that we can *encounter* this God... Most

people, even in our churches, would not claim that church is for encountering a living God who speaks and moves in the world.” (Root, *Churches & the Crisis of Decline* p. 8)

This quote stopped me in my tracks.

Elsewhere in the book he says “What makes a congregation beautiful is its life, not its numbers, programs, or accesses to resources. A community that is alive is beautiful, whether six or six hundred.” (Root, *Churches & the Crisis of Decline* p. 6)

Alive is beautiful... whether six or six hundred.

Alive is beautiful – it’s become a mantra for me. Actually, some of the staff in East Central Ontario Regional Council made me a T-shirt that says it: Alive is beautiful.

And while there are many communities of faith who struggle with sustainability (financial and otherwise), or who feel disconnected from the wider church, there are so many communities of faith across this country who are, in fact, beautifully alive. I know I might see the best in show – but it is enough that it has filled my cup with hope that the transcendent God we say we believe in is active and present in this denomination yet.

Bold Discipleship

When the Global Partners Circle gave us the feedback that they didn’t hear the spirituality of our tradition, my response was that I thought – and I still do – that we suffered more from a lack of bold discipleship than we do deep spirituality. My assumption is that, given the aging demographics of our church, most people in our denomination grew up at a time when Christendom was alive and well in Canada. It determined our national statutory holidays (and still does). It meant cleaning house on Saturday to prepare for worship and sabbath on Sundays, when there were no other events or activities scheduled, and no Sunday shopping. And while we did offer Christian formation programs outside of Sunday worship, we didn’t normally have to strengthen our resolve to invite others to church; it wasn’t a matter of “do your neighbours go to church” but rather “what church do your neighbours go to?”

As congregations have aged and fewer and fewer younger people come to church, many of our opportunities for active discipleship-making and faith formation have fallen by the wayside. That’s not to say they don’t exist at all, but it’s not at the heart of our church. I think the other reason for this is again the resistance to growing Christian nationalism, but also a deeply carried shame for the damage done in the name of mission and evangelism, especially in terms of the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples in Canada. Part of discipleship is sharing the good news of our faith. But in the words of the Very Rev. Jordan Cantwell (42nd Moderator), if we used chocolate cake as a metaphor, we can consider our mixed relationship with evangelism. If we had that piece of chocolate cake (the Good News) and we said to our neighbour “Oh my goodness this is the best piece of chocolate cake I have ever had – but it’s

MINE – you can't have any!" Well, that's just rude! But if we take that chocolate cake and we say "Oh my goodness this is the best piece of chocolate cake I have ever had!" and we shove it into someone else's face without their consent... well, that it also rude!

Being able both rumble with the sins of the past (and our current sins – because we still have more than a few) *and* be articulate and humble in how we share the good news of our faith is, in fact, the point of faith formation. And my impression after these three years as moderator, is that discipleship is the forgotten middle child of the church.



Especially if we think towards the future – which we must – we need to grapple with this call to bold discipleship. Because the future of the church depends on it. Our children and our grandchildren need opportunities to grow in discipleship, and they need a spiritually rooted commitment to ongoing faith formation

modeled for them by those of us further along life's path. But we also need the grace and humility to remember that those who are new to our denomination, and those who are in the first third of life, don't have all the reference points that those more advanced in age and experience have. And so often we fault them for that like it's somehow a personal failing of "United Church-iness." It inhibits our growth, and it leaves power in the hands of a few while the experiences, hopes and dreams of the many go largely ignored.

We need to create spaces and opportunities for each other to get curious, to learn from each other, and to live into our commitment to become an intentionally intercultural church. One of the pieces of feedback I've heard most consistently from ministry personnel who are new to Canada is that while communities of faith want to grow, when they call a minister with experience in growing their congregation, they often don't want to institute the changes their ministers make. And because power and authority is split in our church, often it is the clergy who end up losing the political battles – or worse, they react and lash out at those around them as a result of being disempowered in such frustrating ways.

I truly believe – in fact I know from my own experience and from the leadership and strength I've encountered in the participants of the (Re)Generate program, that better is better, and that better is possible. That it is possible for the church to be both strategic and faithful.

Early on in the (Re)Generate program, the participants and I read Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Life Together* – a little volume written about building an alternative Christian community for theological education.

Bonhoeffer was a German Lutheran pastor, theologian, and co-founder of the *Confessing Church*. The Confessing Church was a movement within German Protestantism in Nazi Germany that arose in opposition to government-sponsored efforts to unify all of the Protestant churches into a single pro-Nazi German Evangelical Church. Apart from his theological writings, Bonhoeffer was known for his staunch resistance to the Nazi dictatorship, including vocal opposition to Hitler's euthanasia program and genocidal persecution of the Jews. He was arrested in April 1943 by the Gestapo and imprisoned at Tegel Prison for 1½ years. Later, he was transferred to Flossenbürg concentration camp. Bonhoeffer was accused of being associated with a plot to assassinate Hitler and was tried along with other accused plotters. He was hanged on 9 April 1945 during the collapse of the Nazi regime.²

Bonhoeffer is a theologian and pastor whose works many of us have relied on when we think of costly solidarity, and our ongoing commitment to daring justice.

He starts in his preface to *Life Together* with daring clarity:

*The subject matter I am presenting here is such that any further development can take place only through a common effort. We are not dealing with a concern of some private circles, but with a mission entrusted to the church. Because of this, we are not searching for more or less haphazard individual solutions to a problem. This is, rather, a responsibility to be undertaken by the church as a whole. There is a hesitation evident in the way this task has been handled. Only recently has it been understood at all. But this hesitation must give way to the willingness of the church to assist in the world.*³

When I first read these words, my heart jumped. These were the words that I had been searching for: I wanted to say “hey, look people, get it together – get your Micah 6:8 on and be nice to each other, because we are all in this together.” Bonhoeffer’s mid-century expression of “this is work to be undertaken by the whole church” is maybe a slightly more moderatorial way to say such things.

Bonhoeffer believed that “it is by God’s grace that a congregation is permitted to gather visibly around God’s word and sacrament in this world... that they know that visible community is [an expression of grace]. [And that the] physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer.”⁴

Bonhoeffer writes that “When people are deeply affected by the Word, they tell it to other people. God has willed that we should seek and find God’s living World in the testimony of other Christians, in the mouths of human beings. Therefore, Christians need other Christians

² Wikipedia.

³ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *Life Together*, transl. by Daniel W. Bloesch (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), p. 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

who speak God's Word to them."⁵

A couple of times over the past two years, I've done a "closed-eye" exercise with gatherings of the church. First I ask people to close their eyes and pay attention to their bodies when they think of the meaning and ritual of our sacraments: baptism and eucharist. Then I ask them to do that same thing, but thinking of the neighbours, and the people next to them in the church. You could take a moment now and do the same.

When you imagined our sacraments of baptism and eucharist, you probably felt your bodies relax, and a deep sense of emotional wellness.

But if I asked you to be honest about whether or not you connect so deeply with the people around you, you might have had a sinking feeling in your stomach. We do not hold each other in that same high regard as we do the sacraments. We do not see each other as sacramental. And in The United Church of Canada that I grew up in, I've had scant few opportunities to share with others when I've been deeply affected by the Word. It's not expected that I would testify or share the good news of my own personal faith. It's more like we look to the bible as a playbook for social justice, rather than the good news that personal as well as social transformation is possible through God's grace and following in the teaching of Jesus, the Word who dwelt among us.

My dedication to spending this next period in ministry – how ever long it lasts, and for whatever shape it takes in the church – whether as moderator or professor at Emmanuel College – is to get at this heart of discipleship. To reconnect with the emotional intimacy and vulnerability needed to be real with each other. Because how can we work at systemic justice and transformation when we don't really deal with our own sinfulness and repentance. That's not to say we need to be individually perfect before we can tackle the big systems of injustice that make people marginal in our societies. I'm not going in the direction of Jesus' exhortation "let them without sin cast the first stone." Not at all. Rather I'm saying that doing the individual work at recognizing our own humanness and our fallibility allows us to develop empathy. It allows us to believe, as sociologist Brené Brown says, "Everyone has a story that will break your heart. And if you *really listen*, *everyone* has a story that will bring you to your knees."

Bonhoeffer writes that "when God was merciful to us, we learned to be merciful to one another. We received forgiveness instead of judgment, we too were made ready to forgive each other. What God did to us, we then owed to others. The more we received, the more we were able to give; and the more meager our love for one another, the less we were living by God's mercy and love. Thus, God taught us to encounter one another as God has encountered us in Christ." As in Romans 15:7 – "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God."

⁵ Ibid., 6.

What if we did that – like *really did that*. It is hard. Lord knows – you ask folks around this room who have known me for the nearly 2 decades since I went into ministry. There are those folks whom I'd rather not look at with sacramental reverence. They get under my skin – I get annoyed – I get judgy. If you *really* knew me, you'd know I swear like a trucker. So, I say things that are sometimes unkind – not *at* others, but in a way that would be offensive to some. And I hide behind the changing social conditions that say that that kind of salty bravado is ok – maybe even revered a little.

But when I do that – when *any of us* do that – we rob ourselves of the real work of doing discipleship with empathy and authenticity so that we might live in Christian community with each other as if we really lived *for* each other.

Daring Justice

As always, this is where our denomination has excelled, in both good and hard ways. I say good because very often we have been driving the actions that help to bend the arc of the moral universe towards justice. And I say hard because sometimes we do that in a way that hurts other people, or destroys relationships. Sometimes that is necessary – like when an interfaith partner chooses to walk away from the table rather than be in dialogue, no matter how carefully or thoughtfully we've tried to engage. But often times I think it's avoidable. We live in a world that is increasingly polarized – and we see outrage online and in digital spaces at every turn. Our churches are vandalized for using inclusive flags to indicate our welcome and our Christologies that lift up a conviction that God loves us not in spite of who we are, but exactly *because* of who we are. That there is a place at the table for everyone. And so it's not surprising to me that I've encountered online hate – like someone on the X.com platform saying “What did you expect from the Queen of the Church of Satan?” And really, unless there was a threat to my physical person, sticks and stones...

But we *also* say things that are hurtful and unfair. We say them out of anger, out of fear, out of frustration, and out of righteous indignation. We are not always careful with our words, being too committed to the idea of being “right” to really hear the pain of our neighbour.





I see so many wonderful actions of daring justice happening in so many places across the church. And at a time when the world needs prophetic witness so very badly.

I've seen the staff in our regional councils and the General Council offices pivot time and time again, using their very restricted resources, to make statements and post prayers in the moment when the world most needs us.

I've also participated in advocacy with our governments, attending meetings that have gone very well, and attending meetings that have gone very poorly. Sometimes our input was appreciated, and other times it was clear that we were receiving only the most perfunctory of welcomes – tolerated at best, but really deemed to be insignificant.

And we see authoritarianism and global instability on the rise. And it is now clear there are genocides happening, not only in Palestine, the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, Yemen, Myanmar, but also risk of genocide in other places. The online newspaper *Science Norway*, the English language source of science news in Norway, reported in 2023 that there are now more dictatorships than democracies in the world.

So many of you – so very many of you – have written to me and to the General Secretary, asking us to lift the voices of the United Church of Canada in opposition to war mongering and in advocacy for the upholding of international law. Sometimes the assumption is that we have done or are doing nothing (which is often incorrect). Sometimes the plea is for us to do more than what we are doing. And my experience of meeting with parliamentarians and civil servants is that more and more, a letter from a church leader means relatively nothing. They know, in ways they didn't used to acknowledge at the height of Christendom, that just because we make a statement doesn't mean that every member of our denomination holds a particular view. And they use that truth against our prophetic witness.

Where we have been strongest, and continue to be strong, is in our ecumenical and interfaith



partnerships. Any time that Canadians gather across faith traditions or denominations, building coalitions of people that feel and believe the same things, our governments are more likely to take notice. And, on the advice of the MP in my riding, the best thing that the churches can do for such a time as this, is to become hubs of building bridges at the local community level. We must not only live *with* our neighbours, but *for* our neighbours. When our elected officials see us doing that, they take notice. And even if they don't, we are

contributing to the reduction of polarization and caring for our neighbours and that is truly embodying the love, faith, and hope that we profess as Christians.

A few fun moments and facts:

How many flights I've taken in three years:



Even our best laid plans fail. We had a briefing meeting before my first trip to African in March 2023. I had asked to be briefed on everything I would need to know before I went. I arrived



Saturday night, 5pm. I was preaching at St. Paul's United Church in Lusaka, Zambia, at 7:30am the next morning. I had been asked to wear my tab collar to make a point about ordained women's leadership in that denomination. I showed up in the lobby of my hotel at 5:30am in a suit and tab collar. And found out that women do not wear trousers to church in Zambia. I do not own a skirt. So a made rush to our partners at 6am to fashion a *chitenge*, or, 'wrapper' out of United Church of Zambia cloth so that I could be dressed appropriately for church.

The participants of the (Re)Generate program are nicknamed The Blazing Walnuts. Our time together has been fruitful, I see huge growth and potential in the



participants, but it has also been a bonding time, including lots of play. Not only that, but the participants have created a designated fund with the United Church Foundation to support future leadership development for ministry personnel.



They are my hope for the future of our church – and I can't wait to keep working on leadership development in my new role as Assistant Professor of United Church of Canada Studies at Emmanuel College in Toronto in the 2025/2026 school year.

Gratitude

None of the things I've been able to do during my term as moderator would be possible without huge sacrifice and understanding from my family. Thank you to my mom and dad, Dolly and Bruce, for raising me to be the person I am. And thank you to my own family: Mauricio, and our kids Gabriel and Esperanza, for everything you've given up for the last three years. And for your gratitude for everything we've gained on this journey in faith, together. I love you so much.

