

REV. BILL THOMAS**Nominating Body**

Niagara Presbytery (Hamilton)

Biographical Sketch

Who am I?

I am a husband, a father, a stepfather, a son, a brother, a minister, and much more. I am married to Cheryl Wood-Thomas, (also a United Church minister). We are very proud and happy parents in a blended family that brings together seven children: Max, Zoe, Victoria, Rebecca, Liam, Rachael, and Fiona, ranging in age from 28 to 13.

I was born in Glasgow, Scotland. My family emigrated to Canada in 1964, arriving in Saint John, New Brunswick. My father was a ship's draughtsman, and so we moved from shipbuilding towns in New Brunswick to Quebec to Ontario, finally settling in St. Catharines, Ontario, where I completed elementary, junior high, and high schools.

Upon graduating from high school I enlisted in the Canadian Armed Forces, Maritime Division (the navy), where I served for three years, eight months, and 17 days. During that time I gained some important insights. First, I realized that military life was not for me. Second, we can encounter moments of grace in the most unlikely places and at the most uncertain times in our lives. It is while serving on board *HMCS Nipigon* that I first felt the nudge toward ministry, although it would be another decade before I would begin to answer.

Soon after leaving the navy, I began studying at Mount Saint Vincent University (Halifax). Upon completing my Bachelor of Arts (Religious Studies, Philosophy, and Women's Studies), I entered the MA program at Concordia University (Montreal) followed by an MDiv at the Atlantic School of Theology (Halifax).

I have served the church as a student, a lay person, and an ordained minister. My ministry has been in both rural and urban settings, and I have served in Quebec, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia (on the mainland and in Cape Breton). At present I am in team ministry at Silver Spire United Church (www.silverspire.ca), back in St. Catharines, Ontario, after a 30-year hiatus.

My introduction to the work of the wider church was through the Twinning program, matching United Church congregations and presbyteries with global partners. Since that early introduction in 1997, I have been involved in the global mission and outreach ministries of our church, starting in the Division of World Outreach and transitioning to the Justice, Global and Ecumenical Relations Unit to Partners in Mission to Church in Mission and now to the Permanent Committee on Programs for Mission and Ministry. Through the years I have been able to work with great people, some of whom are also nominated for Moderator at this General Council.

I have also been blessed to represent our church on a World Council of Churches Solidarity Mission in the Philippines, the National Council of Churches in the Philippines, and the World

Communion of Reformed Churches, and as a member of the coordinating committee of The Caribbean and North American Area Council, where I have witnessed the expansive work of the body of Christ both in Canada and around the world. Within the context of that work I have been able to contribute to some of the empire work, including *Reviewing Partnership in the Context of Empire*. I also had a hand in *Gender Justice and Partnership Guidelines* and Ken Delisle's excellent resource, *Moving toward Full Inclusion: Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in The United Church of Canada*, all documents with which I am proud to have my name associated.

Statement

We are in the midst of change. Of course, that is always true. However, as commissioners, General Council staff, Youth Forum participants, and others journey toward Corner Brook in August, we do so knowing that the conversations we will have, the proposals we will consider, and the decisions we will make will result in significant changes in who we are and how we function as The United Church of Canada. It feels like there is an increased urgency to our discernments and a weight to our decisions brought about by the present context within which we are living, part of which is the fiscal realities facing the church that have been laid out in "United in God's Work."

The Comprehensive Review Task Group has done a great service to the church, committing countless hours to meetings, consultations, collating of results, reflection, and report writing, encouraging us at every level to engage with the information and recommendations being made. We owe a debt of gratitude to the CRTG for their efforts, and regardless of what you feel are the merits or the failings of "United in God's Work," the document and the proposals it offers have certainly sparked conversations across the church.

Last November, I was in Burlington, Ontario, attending Ministry in Motion. This year I have participated in varied gatherings of United Church types. Since January I have been in Victoria, BC, for Epiphany Explorations. I was then back in Burlington for Cruxifusion in April, followed by a quick trip to Halifax for an Alumni Dinner at the Atlantic School of Theology, (my alma mater). Finally, I was in Beausejour, Manitoba, at the Sandy-Saulteaux Centre for the Deepening Understanding of Intercultural Ministries education event offered by the Canadian Churches' Forum.

At first glance this might seem to be an odd array of events and gatherings. It might come as a surprise that there were times, sitting at table and sharing a meal with other participants, when I was struck that similar conversations on common themes were taking place at each event. Words like evangelism, discipleship, partnership, right relations, confession, and reconciliation (the list could go on) kept entering the dialogue. Concerns over theology, Christology, and ecclesiology were repeated over and over again.

At Epiphany Explorations, presenters talked about the need to own the gospel we proclaim, to be firm in our faith and fearless in our evangelism. We were challenged to offer the good news of Jesus Christ to the world, starting in our local communities. At Cruxifusion a number of participants identified themselves as Progressive Christians who stressed both "progressive" and "Christian." My participation in both Epiphany Explorations and Cruxifusion made the

experience at the Intercultural Ministries event that much more valuable. It is both blessing and bane for the United Church that we have such a large tent. In all of our congregations—large or small; rural or urban; east coast, west coast, or somewhere in between—we have a multitude of cultures represented. When I look at my own church, I am looking at youth culture, choir culture, Jamaican culture, Chinese culture, university student culture, choir culture, “old-time religion” culture, “no religion” culture...you get my drift. How do we engage interculturally, and what is the foundation upon which we build?

I am convinced that some of those divisions and barriers that we believe separate us are no longer real. The walls that once divided us, that laid boundaries not to be crossed, can be broken down, and have in many cases already been diminished or removed. There are points of intersection in these conversations where stories can be shared, hurts can be named, and reconciliation can begin to take shape.

When “United in God’s Work” entered the conversation, it was recognized as a starting point. The proposals concerning change to the structure of the church need to be looked at from the lens of gospel-living and gospel-sharing. When considering whether we have four courts, or three, or two...how does that decision allow for more effective and efficacious communication of the gospel? When seeking ways of Chasing (or embracing or welcoming or ...) the Spirit, how do those new ministries, and the church’s investment in them, enhance our ability to mentor and disciple people? How do these decisions empower the church to be the church and people who profess themselves to be Christians to live out that profession? In short, in the midst of change, how do we communicate the good news of Jesus Christ and continue to work toward the kingdom of God?

If we take this question seriously we will move beyond establishing “a process...to continue conversation with the Aboriginal ministries” to a place of standing in solidarity in the pursuit of justice for survivors of residential schools and the murdered and disappeared Aboriginal women across the country. We will recognize that our commitment to partnership demands of us that we include our partners in conversations around church structure, financial matters, and funding formulae as well as evangelism, advocacy, and peaceful protest. My experience has been that our partners possess a wealth of knowledge and are generous in their sharing.

There is much more to say as we journey toward Corner Brook, and I expect there will be other opportunities to speak to particularities. I end this short reflection (each of us was given 1,000 words) with an acknowledgement of the role of the Moderator. The Moderator is called to offer a vision to the whole church. My vision centres around the uplifting and the strengthening of people to live out their own ministries as members of the Body of Christ.

The Moderator is also called to be a pastoral presence to the church. This is particularly important in times of change and transition, and I take this role very seriously. As we discern our future, amid the concerns, questions, and anxieties, as well as the hopes, dreams, and belief that God is indeed still creating and doing a new thing, I hold all of us in prayer.

God bless!