

The Retirees

Wisdom, Thanks and Celebration

*A celebration of the ministries
of those retiring from ordered ministry
Pacific Mountain Regional Council General Meeting,
The United Church of Canada
October 2020*

We asked our newly retired ministers to describe their ministry and journey to date, and to reflect on the question: “What is the greatest challenge you see the church facing?”

Debbie Bentham



I believe that ministry and the call to ministry are a heart and Spirit thing. The technical pieces come later. As a child, I was raised in Quaker meeting. I felt called to be a priest the first time I attended an Anglican church, at the age of ten. It has been a long and winding road since then. As a teen, I was active in youth group. As a young adult, I preached and held a variety of lay led positions in the Pentecostal Church, even doing a stint of travelling, conference speaking and teaching on Intercessory Prayer. I worked first as a police officer, then transitioned to social work, as a single mom. Yet the call continued in my life.

In 2000, I made the decision to formally begin the process of discernment. I attended Regent College for a year, was approved as a candidate in the Anglican Church and subsequently transferred to VST, to pursue my M.Div. With parenting three teenagers and a preschooler, those were very busy years! I graduated in 2004 and accepted a call to St. James Anglican Church in Smithers, northern BC, where I was ordained.

It was as I settled into this small northern town, and began playing hockey, that I met my soul mate, now life partner, Brenda. This was wonderful for me – not so wonderful for the church and the Diocese of Caledonia. I stepped down from ministry in 2007 and returned to social work... yet still the call persisted.

In 2008, I began to attend the United Church in Smithers. One thing led to another, and before I knew it, I was once again discerning a call. I was received as an ordered minister into The United Church of Canada in 2010. Since then I have served in First United Houston and Knox United in Terrace. This was followed by working for BC Conference in a pilot project as

“Minister of Missions,” as well as serving on the “Coastal Circuit Ministry” for BC Native Ministries.

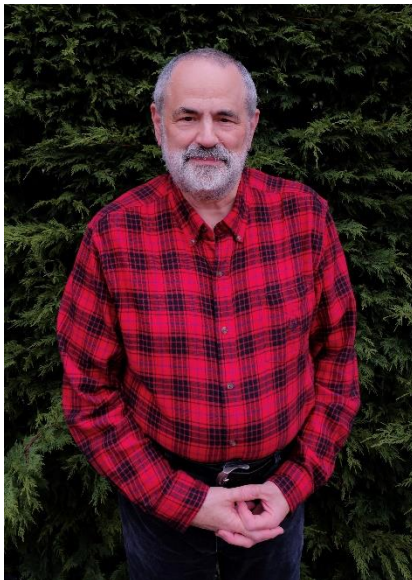
In 2016, I found I was really missing congregational ministry. As there was an opening in my home town, I applied and answered a call to minister at Smithers United Church. Over the last four years I have once again enjoyed working with a faith community.

I have also been pursuing my interest in spiritual direction and have now completed the “Art of Spiritual Direction Program” through SoulStream... and still the call continues, as a new door has opened and a new season in ministry begins for me, as a spiritual director.

In relation to others’ years of ministry in the United Church, my time span of ten years is relatively short. The biggest changes I have seen are: settlement no longer being required, which really affected the rural churches; the recent changes to the governance and structure of our denomination; and of course: the pandemic!

What is the biggest challenge I see facing the church? In the midst of the pandemic, I believe we are being given the opportunity to pause and reflect on who/what it really means to be church. Are we open to transformation? Are we willing to risk trying new and creative endeavors (not just as a “fill in” during COVID) but as new organic ways of being? Or will we just hold on, until we can go back to ways things used to be?

Foster Freed



Having been baptized at Riverside Church in Manhattan in December 1980—after a half-decade of “seeking” including a brief but fruitful stint at Bloor Street United in Toronto—I formally

joined the United Church in October 1981 at Canadian Memorial in Vancouver. Five years later, having gained experience of the church through active lay-participation at CMC (coupled with the gift of supportive spouse Sherry) launched me into the M.Div. programme at Vancouver School of Theology. A challenging and learning-filled internship at First United Church in Vancouver's Downtown East Side was the main event of 1989, followed by ordination at Naramata in May 1990. Settlement at Grace United, Hornepayne, Ontario (look it up on a map!) was the next step: mercifully, a congregation accustomed to the newly ordained! (In short, a good place for the realization that I had no idea what I was doing.). Having received, in November 1992, a call to return to British Columbia—Knox United, Parksville—it took us (now a family with two young children, with two more to follow during our Parksville years) all of 15 seconds to say, “Yes,” although we first completed our three-year commitment in Hornepayne.

Back on the West Coast at the start to July 1993, my personal excitement included the realization that I was about to begin a call over which I had exercised far greater “control” than the process that had “settled” me in Hornepayne. It took but a few months to disabuse me of that illusion: soon awakening to the fact that my “fit” in Parksville was no better than my “fit” in Northern Ontario. Hard to shake the impression that I'd be lucky to make five complete years in this, my second Pastoral Charge! The arrival of Ron Klusmeier as Knox's Music Minister in September 1996 produced a dramatic shift; what followed was seventeen more years at Knox, twelve of them in a rarely uneventful, always creative team-ministry with Ron. Five years after his departure, having learned of a full-time vacancy at Trinity United in Nanaimo—I experienced an unmistakable “nudge” to let my name stand.

Trinity—where I began my service in August 2013—served as a final full-time ministry home; a welcoming and gracious seven years it has been, including the privilege of serving within an Ecumenical Centre. Hard to believe it has been 30 years since my ordination! Reviewing those 30 years, I cannot help but notice that the first 15 included significant involvement in ministry beyond the congregation, including a stint as Comox-Nanaimo Presbytery's Chairperson and two years as BC Conference president. In truth, the final 15 years were much more heavily focused on congregational life: a choice made, in part, in the aftermath of “trauma” experienced at what was my third General Council gathering: Thunder Bay, 2006. Scars from that have yet fully to heal but, happily, they represent a very small hiccup in what I regard as the privilege of having served in the ordered ministry of The United Church of Canada.

There are, of course, no shortage of concerns for the future of our church, many of which pre-date the advent of COVID, but most of which have been heightened by its arrival. These include concern over the loss of connectivity that is a consequence of the elimination of presbyteries; given how little I relished attending Presbytery meetings this one comes as something of a surprise! Less surprising—since I voted against this polity change when the remit came before us—is an ongoing concern with the Office of Vocation, my most significant (though not sole) worry being the potential for a lack of co-ordination between the Region's oversight of

congregations and the national United Church's oversight of ministry personnel, especially in those instances in which things get bumpy in a pastoral relationship.

These are very real concerns, but they pale next to the major concern I have harboured throughout most of the 30 years since ordination. Having entered The United Church of Canada as a "man-of-the-left," I experienced a second "conversion" early on in my time with the church: a second "conversion" which rendered me no longer a "man of the left"! In short, I remain concerned that a denomination which retains a healthy sense of the dangers posed to the integrity of the Gospel by the "Christian Right" seems oblivious to the dangers posed to the integrity of the Gospel from the "Christian Left", of which we are undeniably a part. I have no easy answers for that... but I remain convinced that it represents a major stumbling block, potentially standing in the way of a vital, vibrant and faithful future for The United Church of Canada.

Jim Hatherly



I was raised in Winnipeg, a city I admire for its resilience, creativity and lack of pretension. That was also where the church, in part, raised me. Mine was a fairly sheltered upbringing. It was only later that I came to understand how the monoculture I grew up in limited my exposure to diversity of gender, race, living cultures, sacred expressions and systems of repression. I am grateful for the many who have invited me into their worlds, shared their joy and pain and witnessed to me the dignity of all people and how we find hope and healing.

At the absurd age of 19, I pursued the vocation of ministry. After graduating from the University of Winnipeg I moved to Vancouver to pursue an MDiv at VST. While in Vancouver two relationships developed that changed my life. The first was meeting and marrying Dianne Baker

who has been my life companion for 39 years. We have three uniquely gifted, strong and compassionate daughters, Sarah, Naomi and Rebekah.

The second was a relationship with First United Church and the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, which began as an internship, followed by several months of street ministry and re-emerged in 2017 with a call to serve as Director of Community Ministry. The initial and subsequent experience of First United Church opened my eyes, broke my heart, shifted my perspective and exposed me to the grit of the gospel and the raw way in which individuals and a community struggle, survive, find companionship and heal.

We spent four years in a rural charge south-west of Winnipeg (Sanford, Domain, Ferndale and Starbuck United Churches). They were very kind and forgiving. Later I was called to a small suburban congregation at Crestview United Church in Winnipeg.

From Crestview, Dianne and I (and our then brood of two) were called to serve with the Methodist Church in the Caribbean and Americas in Trinidad. That experience gave us a new lens into the long-term impact of colonialism. We also got to encounter fabulous people, incredible music, a diet to live for, and welcome our third daughter.

We left Trinidad when I accepted a call to serve with John Black Memorial United Church in Winnipeg; a welcoming, generous and engaged congregation. I stayed fifteen years. During a sabbatical bicycle tour for three months around the Highlands of Scotland in 2009, I had the occasion to declutter my soul. I returned, aware that I needed to leave congregational ministry but that ministry had not left me.

I was called next to chaplaincy at Headingley Correctional Centre where I worked for seven years. Much of my work was with populations of sex offenders, persons with mental health disorders and a therapeutic community for those struggling with addictions.

And finally I was privileged to be called back to First United Church, Vancouver in the position of Director of Community Ministry. I retired after three years in that position. I loved every minute of it.

It's hard to imagine changes in the church that have not been affected by changes in the world of which we are part and which we are called to serve. It seems almost inevitable that this would occur.

When I was serving as a chaplain in a correctional centre I would on occasion have an inmate from a Ukrainian Orthodox background and consequently invite a priest from that church to bring the eucharist to the inmate. We developed a friendship. I noted that both the priest and inmate would recite back and forth the same liturgy, in such a rapid-fire speech that although the prayer book was open it was never looked at and the liturgy was memorized. Then I would

witness them having a deep conversation that was full of laughter, intensity and often tears of remorse and confession.

The priest, and it was the same with an Orthodox rabbi who was also invited from time to time, would say, "The liturgy never changes. We will never look at it again in our lifetime. If there is anything God wills to change it is the person."

I feel we sometimes yearn for an old standard of belief. At times our belief systems seem quite fluid. We struggle to find liturgies that are adequate to express how God shows up in our lives, and most clergy would run the other way rather than write an exam on Christology. So be it.

It is instructive to note that Christ was incredibly fluid and selective himself with his use of scripture (he avoided reference to the difficult or objectionable parts of Hebrew scripture), bold (synagogue in Nazareth) in his proclamation and always contextual and creative in how he both acted and spoke. Nothing formulaic at all.

I don't think we need to go much further afield than Luke 4: 18-19 to see that our calling, and it is an urgent one, is to continue what Jesus began. Speak good news to (and with, and only after we have shut up long enough to listen) the poor, set at liberty those who are oppressed (race, gender, economic status, abilities, there is a long list), recovery of sight to those who are blinded (by indifference I would suggest), and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour (global debt forgiveness). Jesus always talked about the economy as the basis of God's justice. That should be enough to keep us all busy, the world in a state of hope and the gospel a living entity.

And in an age of short attention spans and limited historical memory, intentional embodiments of justice ministries will find a deep resonance in the community.

Kathy Hogman



I was born in Manitoba, but being a child of ministers, we moved around a bit. Our family moved to Trinidad in 1962, and returned to Canada in 1969, settling in Winnipeg. I completed my Arts degree at the University of Manitoba and moved to Vancouver to attend VST. Ordained in 1984, I was settled in Wawanesa, Manitoba in a three-point pastoral charge. I was the first woman minister to serve the congregations there, the first single minister, the first minister married and the first maternity leave. Needless to say it was an eventful settlement especially when I remember that this was the time when the ordination of homosexuals became an important part of the Church's life, along with inclusive language and the advent of larger numbers on women in ministry. When I reflect on those years it was very much like being thrown in the deep end and paddling like mad to keep my head above water.

We moved to Dundurn, Saskatchewan in 1989 and I served a two-point pastoral charge. I was the first woman minister in their experience and a maternity leave added to the adventure. When my husband was ordained in 1995 we were settled on Vancouver Island.

I served St. Andrew's in Port Alberni. Here I learned about the United Church's involvement in Residential Schools. It broke my heart. I watched the lawyers try to tear apart the testimony of survivors in court and it horrified me. It was almost impossible to hold my head up in that community recognizing that I was an official representative of the United Church everywhere I went. Finding the strength to confront sin in an institution I loved was definitely not what I signed up for. I discovered what it meant to say, "With God nothing is impossible." The congregation pulled together with determination and love, and wrote a heartfelt and Spirit-filled apology. Together we presented the first apology to the Nuu-chah-nulth people for the harm done by Residential Schools in May 1997. Six hundred members of the 14 tribes gathered

in the gymnasium of the Residential School; I have never been more terrified or more blessed. God was there.

We moved to Edmonton in 2003. Armand and I were excited to be able to work together as a clergy team, something we had been dreaming about for 16 years. Unfortunately, we were only able to serve together for five years at Trinity, when the reality of economics made two full time positions unsustainable. I stayed at Trinity and Armand moved to Millwoods.

In 2013, Armand answered a call to Summerland and I decided to take some time off. I volunteered with BC Conference highlighting the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Hearings. As I began to explore the possibility of returning to ministry, Osoyoos offered me a part-time appointment. I enjoyed working with them so much I realized I might have something left to give and Westbank United Church gave me the opportunity. I was fortunate to finish my ministry with this faithful, dedicated, caring group of people.

Ministry in the wilderness has been a wild ride these last 36 years. But the Spirit has guided me on the way, calling me to go places I never thought possible and my life has been an awesome encounter with the Divine. I wonder what is next....

The greatest challenge today is the same challenge we have always faced. How do we witness to God's love in the world without becoming self-righteous?

Opportunities arise out of the context of ministry. The challenge is to discern the Spirit's call even when the survival of the Church is at stake. Circumstances will determine what aspect of the gospel to focus on: issues of poverty, racism, mental health, addictions, environmental... the list is large. The Church needs to remember to reach outside itself to care for those most vulnerable. We reflect the rich beauty of divine love to a world desperate for good news, desperate for justice, desperate for hope.

We are not alone in our mission, and we cannot depend on our own strength. We are reliant on our connections to each other and the Spirit to sustain us.

The Church is changing, some of the changes are exciting, some are puzzling, and still we remain focused on the ancient mission of love. That is who we are and who we are becoming.

Armand Houle



I grew up within the Roman Catholic tradition and was introduced to the United Church in my mid-20s by the first female minister I ever met, and the person I fell in love with, Rev. Kathy Hogman. During our dating time and after we were married in 1987 I learned much about the church.

I became a member of Wawanesa United Church in Wawanesa, Manitoba. I attended presbytery and conference meetings and marveled at the democratic nature of the church's structure as well as its deep commitment to justice in its many forms. Through this period, I was also experiencing a spiritual awakening as the Holy Spirit filled my heart with new life.

I entered the discernment process and became a candidate for ministry from Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario Conference. I received a Bachelor's Degree from Brandon University and a Master of Divinity Degree from St. Andrew's College. I did my internship on the Dundurn-Hanley Pastoral Charge in Saskatchewan Conference and was ordained in 1995.

I was settled at Trinity United Church in Nanaimo, BC and served there for eight years. Kathy and I moved to Edmonton to work in team ministry at Trinity United. We worked together for five years at Trinity until I moved to Millwoods United Church (also in Edmonton) where I worked for four and a half years. In 2013, we moved to Summerland, BC when I accepted a call to Summerland United Church. I served there for seven and a half years before retiring at the end of June 2020 after 25 years in paid accountable ministry.

Throughout my ministry, I have had the great pleasure and honour of working in all courts of the church from presbytery to conference to General Council Executive. I have also had the

privilege of attending two General Councils.

I cannot write this brief biography without saying a number of thank-yous. To my home congregation of Wawanesa United in Manitoba, who were, for all intents and purposes, my introduction to the UCC, thank you for your welcome, support and faithfulness. As well, thank you to all the congregations I have served during my ministry.

I also want to say thank you to my parents Omer and Mariette Houle and my in-laws, the Reverends Bill and Alice Hogman, all of whom are deceased. I want to thank my parents for their love, support and understanding as I left behind the Roman Catholic tradition and became a Protestant. It was not always easy for them. I also want to pay tribute to my in-laws, Alice and Bill, who were mentors to me and the finest examples of United Church folks you could ever meet.

And a huge thank-you to my wife, Rev. Kathy Hogman. Without your love, support, faith, sacrifice, wisdom, passion for ministry and the church, and the occasional kick in the pants I wouldn't have made it.

As we settle into retirement (Kathy retired at the same time as me after 36 years of ministry), I look forward to grand parenting, camping and curling and whatever adventures and mischief we may get up to.

The greatest challenge facing the Church is a theological one. The United Church of Canada needs to have a theological discussion that asks the question whether a theology based on the experience of the Holy by ancient people can be truly reflective of what is now known about the cosmos and our place in it.

We cannot continue to disguise an old bankrupt theology in kinder, gentler, more poetic words. We need to let go of the small, tribal, theistic god who looks a lot like white men and figure out how the Gospel of Jesus our Christ, the gospel of love, reconciliation, compassion, accountability, community, equity, solidarity and justice, flows from the dream, potential and/or consciousness that was present... or was born... in the big bang and the subsequent creation of a billion stars.

Then we need to invent or find language, poetry, art, rituals, purpose that makes this new understanding intelligible, meaning-filled and relevant to 21st and 22nd century ears.

Sandi Parker



As a certified clinical counsellor, I worked for many years in non-profits and post-secondary institutions throughout British Columbia, before entering ministry in the United Church in 2008. I became a DLM in the early days of the transition from Staff Associates to the new DLM designation and was recognized in 2010. My ministry over the past 12 years has been spent at Highlands United Church in North Vancouver where I served in a variety of roles: Children, Youth and Family Minister, Minister for Education and Faith Formation, Coordinating (transitional) minister, and finally Minister of Community Development. On retiring this past month, I reflected that I have seen and experienced the breadth of ministry at Highlands from the vantage point of every staff office (and even a storage room at one point!). Through these changing roles and changing views, I have been privileged to witness the breadth and diversity of ministry not only at Highlands but within the United Church, and to appreciate the gifts, wisdom, faith and passion of those who make up our communities of faith. With my husband, Nick, I am now living in Sechelt on the Sunshine Coast, looking forward to continuing to connect with and serve church and community.

I believe that one (okay, several!) of the greatest challenges the church is facing is to listen for the prophetic voices in this place and time, to not be afraid to take risks, to consider saying *Yes* before we say *Yes, but...*, and to recognize that *church* does not mean the same to everyone.

Hilde Seal



Ministry is everything you do after you say, “I believe” and open yourself to “Mystery”. My ministry began in my maple tree at eight years old. My tree said that God would keep me safe and free. I began a quest, asking others to talk to me about God. My Gram was my ally along with my strong connection with creation.

I had two summer-intern experiences. With the people of Carbon / Three Hills, in rural Alberta, I listened to the longings of the Elders, heard the dreams of the youth and adults and wove these stories together honouring each person, celebrating the mystery of God among us. Thanks to Rev. Harold for teaching me to weep with the weeping. At Wesley Urban Ministry in downtown Hamilton Ontario, I cultivated the social-justice piece of my heart. Thanks to John for teaching me that hugs don’t have to smell nice, just offer loving support.

I was ordained by Hamilton Conference, June 1, 1997. Teenagers Allan and Nathan placed the red stole on my shoulders. It has an eagle in flight on one shoulder, referencing the hymn “I the Lord of Sea and Sky” and dancing flames. My settlement-church was Knox United in Consort, Alberta. For six years, these gracious folks engaged me and my family and joyfully shared in God’s Ministry. They taught me to slow down and see the wider picture.

Serving with the people of 100 Mile House United Church was a rich experience, teaching me to share stories and to count on God’s participation in all things. After six years, I answered God’s call to join the Ministry Knox United in Parksville. Team ministry with Foster Freed taught me to strengthen my own ministry style and to create a Holy dance with others.

After seven years, I took some time to build a ministry called “Spirit Well”, using ProVision

funding. In this program, I taught folks the basics of caring for and working with persons living with dementia and how to help them and their loved ones to continue to be vital in the church community.

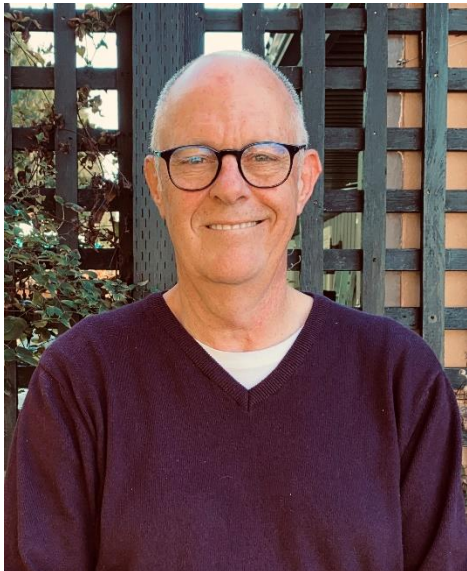
My call to serve with the people of the United Churches of Langley brought new opportunities to work in team ministry. While my focus was on adults, what a thrill to know that the children, youth and young adults of the congregation would have their own minister dedicated to their faith development. My final four years in pastoral ministry were challenging and rewarding. I was embraced and supported in many ways.

Six weeks into retirement, I am not so sure I know what it means yet, but I have been enjoying life fulltime with Char! I will still keep my connections with colleagues, some church activities and familiarize myself with social justice issues in the Sidney area. Having recently become an “End of Life Doula”, I am building my library and discerning how to move forward in that area.

The Creator will continue to encourage, challenge and bless. I am thankful!

We will continue to be challenged with living into the apology to our First Nation sisters and brothers until we figure out how to change systems that marginalize people. Building partnerships and being willing to stand with people is critical.

Phillip Spencer



My spiritual journey began with my baptism as an infant at Warbeck Moor Methodist Church in Liverpool, England in 1953. My family moved to Canada four years later and, since it struck me as reasonable to accompany them, I found myself attending First United Church, Kelowna, and

then later, Mount Paul United in Kamloops. I should say that I had no interest in ordered ministry in my early years. If I'd been asked to choose between ministry and pearl diving, I would I have been searching for flippers.

Following high school, I ended up as a Registered Nurse, working in the Operating and Emergency Rooms, which was a bit surprising for someone who would become faint at the sight of blood. I'm once again reminded that The Almighty has a habit of using the unlikely for God's purposes. While I was working in the OR God chose a kindly Mennonite Bible study group to lead me to intentionally become a follower of Jesus, and in time I heard a call to ordered ministry, surprising any who were acquainted with me. I initially thought the call was to hospital chaplaincy, but my friend, the Rev. Paul Davis rightly noted that pastoral ministry has some special charms. Speaking of love and special charms, this was also about the time that I met Tevis, who had the courage to marry me.

Following formal theological education in 1990, and being that I had learned to speak Anglican while at VST (in retrospect, I had the vocabulary, but my accent was pretty dodgy), I was sent, along with Tevis and our young daughter, Ailish, to Port McNeill-Port Alice Pastoral Charge, a shared Anglican-United Ministry, the first 4 months of that settlement being an internship. After a full lectionary cycle, I was called to the Qualicum Beach Pastoral Charge: St. Stephen's, Qualicum and Grace United, Coombs. To our delight, our son, Conall, arrived shortly thereafter.

I spent 27 years in Qualicum, and it was a delightful, rich, occasionally challenging, but truly blessed time. As my colleague Paul observed, pastoral ministry is a remarkable thing and I believe that congregations require most of our attention, for it is there that lives change. The local church is the fundamental unit of the Church, and while I have been involved in the other courts, most of my energy and focus has been on congregational and community life. While often intense and busy, I discovered that one of the great benefits in congregational ministry has been a flexibility in my schedule that allowed significant time to be spent with my family, as well as the ability to travel.

The future? I look forward to more touring abroad (we live in hope!), cycling, spending Christmas Eve with family, and to finally sitting next to Tevis whenever we're able to resume regular church attendance. Many thanks to all my colleagues in this ministry for your support over the years. We'll see what God has in mind for us next!

The Church in the largest sense – at least in our western context – is faced with doing its mission in a time of increased and increasing secularity. We lack standing in the eyes of many and our temptation may indeed be to try and recover that particular place we once occupied in our culture. Remembering Karl Barth's observation about the Bible and the newspaper, I suspect that a further temptation for us will be to spend a great deal of time reading the newspaper, looking for places where we can show the contemporary relevance of the gospel,

the good news of Jesus Christ. The danger here is that the good news is pure scandal, an offence to some and foolishness to others, but works most wonderfully when it is revealed in all its scandalous glory.

Without putting down the newspaper, we might be wise to risk following the advice given to that struggling 1st century church in 1 Corinthians 15, remembering the gospel that the Apostle Paul preached: Christ crucified and raised. It does seem like foolishness, but it really is the power of God. And that will surely be enough.

Karen Wood



I enter this time of my life with no complaints. I have had a very full professional life. I completed a Bachelor of Science in Rehabilitation Medicine at UBC in 1970, and worked for many years as both an Occupational and a Physio Therapist. In 1976, I qualified to be a Registered Midwife (England) and worked for many years to have midwifery recognized and legalized in Canada.

I came to the ministry late in life, completing the DLM program in 2010. My home congregation on Texada Island supported me throughout the training period, and has been my one and only charge. We have grown together spiritually through these years, and so it is with joy and gratitude (and some sadness) that I handed over the leadership to Rev. Gayle Chouinard at the end of June this year.

I look forward to having more time to enjoy living in this beautiful part of the world, nurturing myself and my loved ones, and welcoming people from all over Canada to my vacation rental, Rosebank Cottage by the Sea.

It has been an honour and a privilege to do this work, and I have been blessed to serve this church for fifteen years.

The greatest challenge our church is facing (after the pandemic, that is), in my view, is finding ways to be perceived as relevant to a new generation. Somehow this must be done while continuing to serve the spiritual needs of our elderly congregants who are faithfully supporting the church's very existence.