



REV. GRETTA VOSPER'S WRITTEN SUBMISSIONS

Prepared for the Interview Committee in advance of Rev. Vosper's June 29, 2016 Review

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Litigation with a conscience.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Part I: Introduction

1. In an apparently unprecedented chapter in the history of The United Church of Canada (“UCC”), the UCC is seeking to review the “effectiveness” of Reverend Gretta Vosper by examining her continuing affirmation with the questions of ordination. The questions of ordination focus on one’s belief in a Trinitarian conception of God, which includes the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

2. It is important to note that no question about Rev. Vosper’s “effectiveness” has been raised by members of her congregation at West Hill United Church (“West Hill”). Indeed, the congregation at West Hill remains steadfastly in support of their chosen Minister and has submitted their own separate written submissions to this effect.

3. The reason why Rev. Vosper finds herself on the receiving end of a Church inquisition is due to her use and adoption of the term “atheist”. Rev. Vosper adopted the label “atheist” in 2013 as an expression of solidarity with people around the world who were being persecuted and murdered for challenging religious fundamentalism and extremism.

4. The term “atheist” has caused a great deal of confusion as to the precise contents of Rev. Vosper’s beliefs; however, Rev. Vosper has never shied away from repeatedly and publicly explaining her beliefs. In summary, Rev. Vosper does not believe in a traditional theistic God — a God that is supreme, omnipresent, omniscient, benevolent, omnipowerful. Rather she believes in a metaphorical God, as a symbol for a set of values that guides one’s life in relationship with others. In short, Rev. Vosper believes that God is love.

5. Rev. Vosper’s beliefs, and the application of her beliefs to her ministry, have long been a matter of public record. Rev. Vosper has published two books that describe her understanding of

God and argue for the importance of UCC teachings regardless of any belief in a theistic, supernatural being.

6. Those who will interview Rev. Vosper on the questions of ordination should understand upfront that although this process *appears* to be about discerning Rev. Vosper's belief in God, in fact the question is really about what *type* of God Rev. Vosper believes in. At its essence, this review necessarily involves a definitional exercise: what does Rev. Vosper mean when she uses the term God?

7. Rev. Vosper has dedicated the bulk of her Ministry at West Hill to finding better ways to clearly define what she means by the term "God". The United Church of Canada, in proceeding with an unprecedented review of a Minister's beliefs, will be also be forced to define its terms and 'show its work'. In order for The United Church of Canada to reach a decision about whether Rev. Vosper's use of the term God is acceptable or not, the United Church of Canada will have to decide whether it is prepared to define and enforce a singular definition of God or whether congregants and ministers are permitted to explore and define their own conceptions of God.

8. The following is Rev. Vosper's effort to "show her work" and "define her terms". In the below Executive Summary, we provide an overview of: (1) Rev. Vosper's theological training and education; (2) Rev. Vosper's ordination in 1993; (3) Rev. Vosper's understanding of God and its application to her ministry; and, (4) an overview of West Hill's view on these proceedings. Following the Executive Summary, find Rev. Vosper's full written submissions which provides a narrative exploring the evolution and sources of her beliefs, with references to various theologians and religious scholars. Further, we understand that West Hill has already filed their own submission in support, separate from the below submissions. We were fortunate to receive an advance copy of West Hill's submissions and have excerpted portions of the congregation's

submissions in the Executive Summary. The sum of all of these submissions will provide the necessary context for Rev. Vosper to answer the questions of ordination at her interview on June 29, 2016.

Part II: Rev. Vosper's Theological Education

A. Formative Years: 1964-1974

9. The unifying thread throughout Rev. Vosper's informal and formal theological education was a consistent invitation to explore, engage with and challenge every teaching, story and text. Rev. Vosper recalls that this Socratic approach to her theological education began as early as her formative years when her parents were members of Sydenham Street United Church in Kingston, Ontario.

My parents were active members of Sydenham Street United Church in Kingston, Ontario, and it was in this family and this church's Sunday School that I was first taught and invited to explore ideas about God. The challenge, of course, was to translate what we found in ancient stories into real world settings. My teachers, with the use of a new contemporary curriculum and the support of ministerial validation of contemporary methods of exploration, offered us the material and the opportunity to ask questions, and guided us through our study of the complexities of Christian teaching. Biblical stories were mined for evidence of a pattern that would demonstrate God's nature and activity. God was a creator but not the only creator; the myth of the biblical creation stories was juxtaposed with other mythic creation stories. God was a provider but not able to meet our every need without our participation in the process, and even with our best efforts, many basic needs were not met. God helped us divide actions, choices, and consequences into good and bad by teaching us to look for love in the input and the outcome of events. God was a catalyst for action, speaking through men (mostly) who were then able to stand up to powerful people and systems and attempt to make change. – Rev. Vosper

10. Rev. Vosper recalls that her earliest theological classes at Sunday School incorporated a great degree of latitude to explore and challenge the very idea that the Bible contains the *absolute truth*.

In our classes, we were offered the opportunity to consider the problems created when the “core truth” of the Bible was taken to be the *absolute* truth; to mean something other than it actually states; to be insufficient for addressing emerging needs over the centuries; and to be out of date and no longer relevant. Even then, we were exploring the Bible as a document that could, and should, be critiqued.
– Rev. Vosper

11. Rev. Vosper’s earliest Christian education involved thinking about the idea of God as a Father figure. Rev. Vosper’s recollection of this teaching was that this was a *metaphorical* understanding of the concept of God.

Learning about the idea of God as a Father was, of course, an early part of my Christian upbringing. The idea was presented as one which distinguished itself from understandings of God as they had been expressed previously in the Hebrew Scriptures (then known as the Old Testament). Beyond "God Most High," "Jehovah," the ultimate judge or arbiter of mercy, we learned that the idea of God as Father personalized Christianity in a new and important way. Still, even as the idea of God as a Father was being taught to me, my Sunday School curriculum stressed that it was a metaphor. – Rev. Vosper

12. Later, Rev. Vosper’s metaphorical understanding of “God as Father” transitioned into an understanding of “God as Love”.

It was in this Senior Class at Sydenham Street Sunday School that I absorbed and assumed the idea that understanding God as Father meant understanding God as love. (You may recall the funky 1970s "Live Love" stickers that accompanied the curriculum.) The sections exploring the concept of God as Father used the idea of a father's love to personalize the relationship we were being encouraged to develop with God. The headings of the different sections wove the strands together in the tale: Love, Love Cares, Love Punishes, Love Forgives.

...

God the Father was a metaphor we could work with, reinforced by the curriculum’s emphasis on interpretation and reinterpreting – beyond God the Father, the metaphor worked for me as God is Love. – Rev. Vosper

13. This “God as Love” concept was a lens by which Rev. Vosper engaged with various challenging theological ideas such as the concept of the Trinity in *The New Curriculum*. The difficulty of understanding the meaning of the Trinity was addressed head on by R.C. Chalmers in

his work *Project World*. Chalmers applied the concept of “God as Love” to the concept of the Trinity. Reflecting on Chalmers’ application, Rev. Vosper stated:

Chalmers presented the Trinity as an "attempt to bring together the three major ways in which we have experienced God," noting that every time we might try to form a picture of God, we would fall far short. He shared with us some of the ways in which the Trinity has been described. Again, this time even more metaphorically, we were exposed to the idea of love as a stand-in for the three persons of the Trinity. Augustine "likened the Trinity to God the Father, the lover; Christ the Son, the beloved; the Holy Spirit, the love that unites them." (p.125) I was returned again to the use of love as an explanation of what was meant by the complex characters intertwined, separately, and yet into one thing. – Rev. Vosper

14. Even as a young person, Rev. Vosper was consistently given the space and permission to engage with a variety of theorists, each with their own perspectives on how to understand the conundrums posed by interpreting ancient texts in today’s modern world. Rev. Vosper recalls that these formative experiences set the stage for a type of intellectual freedom that she has assiduously maintained to this day.

As a teenager, the permission to explore reasonable answers to what appeared to be incomprehensible stories was not only freeing but affirming of our own ability to think and consider meaning and values as we examined traditional texts. Sydenham Street provided a safe place to study, question, interpret, and reinterpret. I was further encouraged to approach texts this way during my studies at Mount Allison University where radical theologians such as Eldon Hay invited us to deconstruct the religion we had been handed - much of it already deconstructed in The New Curriculum - and create a religious worldview that engaged with contemporary culture in a relevant, appropriate, and life-giving way. – Rev. Vosper

15. Rev. Vosper, like many members of The United Church of Canada, is a product of The New Curriculum. Rev. Vosper recalls that her earliest Sunday School education addressed head-on the difficulties of applying the stories from the Bible in the present day with our current contemporary and scientific understanding of how the world works.

Early in my Sunday School education, I was exposed to the challenges inherent in the apparent contradictions between the Bible and contemporary science. The New Curriculum presented the Bible as filled with stories which needed to be understood as parables. Hardie advised that "It is off the track to say that Genesis is not true because science contradicts it. Science does not contradict it. It is not the truth of Genesis, but our understanding of it, which is at fault. If we try to take it literally, we miss the whole point and purpose. It is what an eminent biblical scholar has called a "parable" - "a story which may or may not be literally true (no one asks whether the Good Samaritan ever literally "happened"); yet which conveys a meaning beyond itself" (p. 18)

The New Curriculum acknowledged the presence of differing creation stories in the text: "The second story introduces the epic of men and their relations with God and between themselves. This story is not to be taken literally. Adam and Eve were never intended to be thought of as the actual parents of the human race. If we insist on this 'word for word' understanding, then at once we are landed in the midst of ridiculous difficulties such as the time-honoured question, where did Cain get his wife? ... It is an unmerited insult to the writer to suppose that he did not see such an obvious difficulty. In fact, he chose for his representative man the name "Adam," the Hebrew word for "every man" or humanity."

Even as the authors of the curriculum worked hard to present the concept of two books joined together in their telling of the long history of God's activity in the world through his people, they reinforced our need to look beyond the literal to the mythic stories they were trying to tell. Perhaps the main takeaway from The New Curriculum in its examination of the Bible was this: "The stories in the first section of Genesis are not to be taken as any attempt at factual history or science. The Old Testament writers were concerned only with the lessons that history and science (as they understood it) had to teach. They were concerned less with facts than with the *interpretation* of facts. The worst mistake that can be made is to think of them as news-writers. They were not reporters on the staff of some ancient chronicle. If anything, they were editorial writers, who took the facts and interpreted them in the light of God's revelation." (p. 27) Even so, they told the truth of God's presence with his people, a truth that was often hard to discern, given the content of many of the stories. – Rev. Vosper

16. Rev. Vosper's earliest engagement with Christian theology was not simply about taking an interest in religion. Rev. Vosper had an early understanding that her education could be used as a catalyst for action in favor of assisting those in need. In this vein, Rev. Vosper recalls being influenced by Frank H. Morgan's work *God Speaks through People*.

At the end, my greatest learning was that whatever it was God wanted me to do or be, I was going to have to figure it out for myself. No amount of biblical

exploration would stipulate those roles specifically for my individual life, but I saw that work was yet to be done. The world hadn't found its way to the kind of peace we were taught God pursued. As long as that was true, the choice, in my limited understanding, was to try to do that work and, in so doing, I would be putting myself in alignment with what God was also trying to do.

The final chapter of the New Curriculum's intermediate level book, *God Speaks through People* by Frank H. Morgan emphasized the importance of decision and action: "What Are You Going to Do About It?" He presented the need to respond to whatever it was that God needed you to do, pointing out that if you shirked the responsibility, God would simply find someone else. God's work, he argued, isn't going to be thwarted by a shirker, but he cautioned us with a brief story meant to teach us that if we did shirk, we might never find the kind of contentment we'd witnessed in the stories of conviction we'd studied in the class. "Think of those who did respond. Moses, Mary, David, Deborah, Nehemiah, Lydia, Stephen, Peter. They did not have an easy life, but they had a thrilling one. God has a task for you. What are you going to do about it?" And with that, Morgan set before us a challenging journey. – Rev. Vosper

17. To this day, Rev. Vosper's belief in The United Church of Canada is based on the idea that the church can act positively in response to the needs of many. Rev. Vosper noted that her "commitment to the ideals of personal responsibility and accountability was born in this classroom."

B. Formal Theological Education

18. Rev. Vosper obtained her formal theological education at Queen's Theological College, where she entered the Masters of Divinity program in 1987. Similar to her formative years at Sunday School, Rev. Vosper recalls that her formal theological education provided a broad space to challenge and engage with a variety of theorists. Rev. Vosper and her classmates were consistently invited to subject all theological material to thorough examination and academic criticism.

We studied the Bible and historical documents of the church using a variety of methods, including textual criticism, through which we sought to identify the earliest versions of biblical texts (a surprise to those who arrived at College believing there was only one, perfect version of the Bible); historical criticism

which set writings in their particular historical and social contexts (another surprise when introduced to the argument that some “prophesies” had been written years, decades, or centuries after the event supposedly predicted); literary criticism by which the genre of selected pieces were established in hopes of further insights about its origins; form criticism which focused on pre-literate forms that existed within the text; and redaction criticism which essentially used a cut and paste method to compare different passages to determine how the complete whole had come together over time, the original sources and the editorial additions which held the continuities together.

All of these methods brought a critical perspective to textual interpretation and over all of them lay a hermeneutic of suspicion: our prejudices, what we wished to find in a gospel or text, had to be identified and thoroughly examined. Nothing was sacred or immune from examination and challenge. – Rev. Vosper

19. Rev. Vosper entered theological college at a time when theological scholarship was being influenced by increased attention to previously marginalized voices.

As the first year of my theological education drew to a close, my classmates and I debated the wisdom of taking the question about the ordination of gays and lesbians to the floor of General Council that summer, 1988. Some argued we didn't have enough confidence that the vote would go in the direction of love, that we were risking everything by being reckless. They argued that the vote should be delayed until those who would undoubtedly vote against it could be persuaded of the need to change their minds and envision a new future. We'd parsed scripture passages that referred in any way to the issue, and published blank pamphlets proclaiming them to include everything Jesus had ever said about same sex love, which was, of course, nothing. Some weren't sure; others argued that love would win out, that we could have confidence in the conciliar model of our church where hearts could be changed and understandings morphed into something quite unexpected and freeing. We had shared openly and lovingly and some imagined that the wider church would have the same capacity to do so. Anxiety was the norm in those difficult days. We doubted our church; we doubted the authority of scripture; we doubted our leaders; we doubted the idea of god; we doubted salvation. We doubted. And that, it seemed, was what that theological education could best teach us: to doubt and to do it boldly. – Rev. Vosper

20. During Rev. Vosper's theological training, she was also exposed to several previously marginalized feminist theologians, in particular:

...feminist theology was coming to the fore during my time at Queen's Theological College. We regularly had conversations, sometimes challenging ones, about the use of gender-exclusive language. The work of engaging

congregations on this had already commenced but the work of embedding feminist voices in the study of theology was still limited. Several years later, theological books by female theologians were still categorized and filed in the United Church Bookstore under Women's Issues.

...

Many women had done much of that work before us and more were to come. Naomi Goldenberg's *The Changing of the Gods* argued that the theism of the Bible was so rife with misogyny that only a return to a concept as feminine as "the Goddess" could right the wrongs Christianity had wreaked. Phyllis Tribble refused to let go of the roots of our tradition, however, and in *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* dove deeply into ancient Jewish texts where she found what she argued were non-patriarchal images of the divine intimated in the recurrence of words related to the word "womb." Her *Texts of Terror* drove home the misogyny present in the Bible in passages often overlooked by lectionary committees and pastoral preachers. Through her eyes, the world's most beloved book wasn't fit for bedtime reading, especially for children. Rosemary Radford Ruether leaned in to the denial of her right to the priesthood in the Roman Catholic Church of which she was a member and launched WomenChurch, a movement that laid out accessible, feminist liturgies used by and influential in many feminist circles and women's spirituality groups. Her *Faith and Fratricide* employed her skills to proclaim anti-Semitism a product of Christianity, sourcing it in the gospels to which we were devoting ourselves. – Rev. Vosper

21. It was in this context that Rev. Vosper's understanding of the traditional theistic God – a God that is supreme, omnipresent, omniscient, benevolent, omnipowerful – was under constant challenge as a direct consequence of her theological education.

God, a supreme, omnipresent, omniscient, benevolent, omnipowerful being who resides in and rules both the supernatural and natural realms and who has the ability to intervene in the latter, the theistic concept of God, did not survive my theological education. It had barely been present throughout, and dissolved, I believe, in my first introduction to the challenging but hope-filled images evoked by Teilhard de Chardin's limitless and ever evolving theology. I found those images merging with the challenges to traditional theologies and cosmologies presented by the then-Catholic outlier Matthew Fox and his friend, the green theologian Brian Swimme, who invited me to see god in everything and in nothing and to watch its presence emerge and recede in every circumstance of my life. It was made real for me in the civil disobedience of the Berrigan brothers and the liberation theologians. I came to know god as something I could acknowledge or deny, as love I could show or withhold, and by doing so, either limit or enhance its presence in my life. My choices – everyday or once in a lifetime – created or destroyed the possibility of god. It took years for that idea to cohere into how I came to understand god, but the loss of a god as described by writers in a long ago

and distant time was the direct result of my theological education and for that, I am forever grateful. – Rev. Vosper

22. For Rev. Vosper, her formal theological training was a time of great experimentation, not only with ideas, but also with a variety of *methods* for presenting such ideas.

When I began my studies, I had had a very limited exposure to anything out of the ordinary in a United Church. I had spent many Sunday mornings with friends at the local Anglican Cathedral, but most had been at the equally predictable services of the church in which I had been raised. Mind you, we had a much feistier minister than we'd had when I was a child, but the music, the readings, the rest of the service looked pretty much the same.

Theological college exposed me to drama, dance, the use of colours, new music including music used exclusively for liturgical impact rather than for theological edification, all of it completely and utterly new to me. My background, which I had thought was pretty out there, proved to be as standard a menu as any other United Church might provide. I was entranced with the possibilities and took heartily to exploring creative ways to make worship more engaging, transformational, even. Professors who had taught us the basics, gave us free reign.

Within the parameters of the liturgy, which in the UCC was very fluid, we experimented with poetry, drama, diverse materials (many bringing elements of “creation” into worship setting), candles, responsive readings, versicles, litanies, and communion by intinction – something that had been introduced at my home church as a special thing that happened only during the magical service held on Christmas Eve. Most of it came in from more sacramental traditions but we were experimenting and who cared where it came from? If it was effective, it was worthy. We were playing at alchemy; art, word, experiential elements, and hearts all brought together to cause an otherwise impossible transformation. These were important opportunities for us to dig into our own creativity and invite its expression.

23. In this intellectual milieu, Rev. Vosper recalls an experience which hinted at the potential discordance between her theological education - in which free intellectual criticism was commonly encouraged - and the more constrained expectations that could arise once in the pulpit.

One day in class, after I had once again requested that a professor refrain from gender exclusive examples and language, that professor responded that his job was to prepare me for the pulpit and, just as it would be a waste of time for the Teacher's College to teach its students about the latest in projection technology if

their future classrooms would have an overhead projector, it would be a waste of time to teach me to use inclusive language when churches continued to use traditionally masculine language. He apologized to me later after returning from a sabbatical leave. This raised a critically important issue regarding the reality with which all theological college students studying for ministry must address at some point: the difference between the theology they are taught in college and the beliefs held, often tenaciously, by those in their future the pastoral charges. – Rev. Vosper

24. This tension between the education provided at theological college and the often more conservative expectations placed on ordained ministers is a theme that would arise again and again throughout Rev. Vosper's formal education. In particular, Rev. Vosper recalls that her theological education did not require her and her classmates to abide by a *literal* interpretation of doctrinal statements. Instead, Rev. Vosper and her classmates were aware that they would be required to be in "essential agreement" with church doctrine.

Our classroom examinations of the Articles of Faith of the Basis of Union often brought about incredulity and loud guffaws. Much later, during the General Council's work on developing a new statement of faith, when I introduced the Articles to the congregation at West Hill and others, I discovered that few were aware of them at all. When they do read them, they are often aghast at the exclusive language, archaic concepts, and seemingly pre-enlightenment understandings of the world our existing statements seemed to uphold and promote.

We all knew we were going to need to be determined to be in "essential agreement" but, based on everything we had learned in our time at seminary from teachers and texts, we did not expect conference Interview Boards or Education and Students' Committees to take literal approaches to the Articles of Faith. We understood that if we were granted a United Church Testamur, it would be because we had successfully completed the requirements for study in the United Church of Canada, and understanding the place of the Articles of Faith in the contemporary church was included in those requirements. We understood that the Conference E & S Committee (subsequently combined with the Interview Board to become the Conference Interview Committee) would discern our essential agreement and recommend ordination only if they were convinced by our interviews and written applications that our beliefs constituted what the Conference determined essential agreement to be (Note: this could be entirely different in one conference than in another, of course.) The College had done its work; in examining and approving its candidates for ordination, each Conference was affirming or denying the program of instruction provided by the theological

college. If a college was prepared to provide a Testamur but a Conference was unwilling to ordain, the reasons to deny ordination would most likely go to other areas of suitability, not essential agreement. The completion of the course of study provided by the College would have already established essential agreement.
– Rev. Vosper

Part III: Rev. Vosper's Ordination

25. As part of preparing to enter theological college, Rev. Vosper went through the ordination process in the late 1980s. Rev. Vosper's time at theological college impacted her understanding of what it means to be "called" to ministry.

When preparing to enter Queen's Theological College, I went through the process toward ordination as it existed in the late 1980s. Following my initial interview with my congregation, my minister inquired privately about my call. I said I didn't think that I had anything that another might recognize as a literal "call", but that I felt deeply about entering the ministry despite my inability to locate an impetus for that conviction.

...

Much of the conversation at Queen's that pertained to call revolved around our relationship to others and to the world and how those relationships would be lived out from the position of an ordained minister. The difference between a professional and confessional role was explored and I found I moved with ease into use of the latter to explain my sense of call. It reflected the fundamental nature of the relationship I had to life, to the people in my life, to church, to my future role in that church. If I were able to serve and find ways to do so that nurtured my own self at the same time, then I would be living out what I considered my call to be.

...

My call had to be answered by all of me, not just the part who studied theology or attempted to practice spiritual disciplines. Call was about everything.

What call was *not* for me, was a communication or sign from a divine interventionist deity directing me to the path chosen for me and for which that deity had outfitted me. There were students at the College who reported extraordinary experiences from which they had deduced a "call to ministry". I did not have an experience at all like that; my call emerged as a deep conviction that I was to use my gifts in a particular area. – Rev. Vosper

26. Rev. Vosper was ordained in 1993 in Pembroke by the Bay of Quinte Conference. We pause here to note that the Ordination Questions which were posed to Rev. Vosper at the time were not the same questions as those before Rev. Vosper today. The Questions of Ordination, which

Rev. Vosper answered in 1993, did not include the classical Trinitarian Formula. Instead, Rev.

Vosper was asked to affirm the following:

Presider: Within the ministry of the whole people of God, you are called to a ministry of Word and Sacrament and Pastoral Care. You are to exercise your ministry in accordance with the scriptures and in continuity with the faith of the Church. With God's people, you are to discern the needs, concerns and hopes of the world and proclaim by word and deed the justice of God's reign.

You are to love and service the people among whom you work, caring alike for young and old, strong and weak, rich and poor.

You are to teach and preach, to declare God's judgment and forgiveness and announce God's blessing in the assembly of the people, to lead in prayer and preside at the font of baptism and at the table of the Lord.

You are to nourish, and be nourished by Christ's people from the riches of God's grace and, together with them, to glorify God in this life and in the life to come.

I ask you therefore, do you believe in God who created and is creating, who has come in Jesus, the Word made flesh, to reconcile and make new, and who works in us and others by the Holy Spirit?

Candidates: I do.

Presider: Do you believe that God is calling you to the ordained ministry of Word, Sacrament and Pastoral Care and do you accept this call?

Candidates: I do.

Presider: Will you, with Christ's people, be faithful in prayer and in the study of scripture, that you may know the mind of Christ?

Candidates: I will.

Presider: Will you endeavor to teach and preach the Word of God and to administer the sacraments, that the reconciling love of Christ may be known and received?

Candidates: I will.

Presider: Will you be faithful in the pastoral care of all whom you are called to serve, laboring together with them to build up the household of God?

Candidates: I will

Presider: Are you willing to exercise your ministry in accordance with the scriptures, in continuity with the faith of the Church, and subject to the oversight and discipline of the United Church of Canada (*sic*)?

Candidates: I will

Presider: May God, who has given you the will to do these things, give you the grace and power to perform them.

27. Preceding these questions, Rev. Vosper's beliefs were explored for essential agreement. Within the context of her essential agreement with Church Doctrine, Rev. Vosper was able to answer in the affirmative to the questions of ordination, as they were posed to her in 1993.

Part IV: Rev. Vosper's Conception of God

28. Rev. Vosper holds a metaphorical conception of God that is defined by a set of values which serve as guidance for leading one's best life, centered on the relationships amongst humans and between humans and the natural environment. Rev. Vosper centers her understanding of God within the context of other influential theologians, such as Lloyd Geering of New Zealand who is the author of the text *Christianity without God*. Rev. Vosper addresses Geering's work in an excerpt from her 2008 publication *With or Without God: Why the Way We Live is More Important than What We Believe*.

A worthy heritage

So the idea of God not being a being isn't that crazy after all. Indeed, Lloyd Geering, New Zealand theologian and author of *Christianity without God*, explores the development of the concept of a theistic god, by which I mean a god with "being"-ness, one able to act independently of us, and finds the roots of non-theism deep within the Christian tradition and the philosophical arguments it has historically rejected. In a mere 146 pages, Geering answers a whole host of arguments that might be made against a non-theistic understanding of God and challenges us to finally recognize that in its current doctrinal incarnation, the church can only be doomed.

Finding traces of non-theism already in existence in early Judaism, Geering steers his way through the development of the Christian scriptures, early doctrine, and subsequent theology and philosophy to arrive at his point—that non-theism not only grows out of the Christian tradition but is the only logical next step for the church to take. Along the way, he points out several remarkable insights or assimilations that should have tolled theism’s death knell long ago.

Hebraic understandings of God developed in the same tribal mythology as did those of other faiths. During the first Axial age, when those understandings were being challenged and significantly changed, within Judaism polytheism gave way to monotheism, a belief in one God who, initially, ruled over the other gods but then came to denounce the existence of any gods other than himself. Through the course of that shift, it became increasingly obvious that no one person or tribe could conclusively describe God. The understanding of God as being beyond description came to be the norm. Indeed, following that period, any attempts to describe God were considered blasphemous. It was as if in order to coalesce many gods into one, the description of the one had to incorporate all the characteristics of the many. Such a comprehensive god, of necessity, came to be beyond description.

As Christianity developed amongst those who claimed Jewish heritage, this comprehensive God was further refined by new arguments to which it was exposed. The platonic concepts of a remote, impersonal god, *theos*, stretched the understanding of the Israelites who understood a very personal God as having mucked about in history with them, exhibiting all too human characteristics. Complicating this relationship was the Stoic concept of *theos* as the principle of rationality and order upon which the whole of the universe was set. Early Christianity grew out of a delicate interweaving of these and many other different experiences and understandings.

In fact, Geering argues that the doctrine of the Holy Trinity was just such a feat. Unable to reconcile the complex perspectives of those for whom the Christian community had become deeply meaningful, it was not inappropriate to simply express all of them and perhaps all at once. Geering points to Paul’s early benediction, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit,” as a straightforward inclusion of such a variety of experience claiming that each of the three separate natures appealed to a significant experience being grafted into this one, new concept; through the apostles was mediated a rich experience of the grace bestowed upon them by Jesus; from its Jewish roots came a deep experience of God’s love; and within early Christian communities, experiences of fellowship were found to be transformative. Geering argues that Paul never intended his words to be law. Like so many others at the time, Paul was merely writing it as he saw it, addressing situations in whatever way he felt most appropriate, and accommodating his style to the needs of the moment. It was only in subsequent arguments about the exact

nature of God, soon to be described as the Trinitarian “godhead”, that his words were argued to be Truth (with a capital “T”).

If a single God could be argued to be of three persons and one substance (already confused by translation of oblique Greek terms into Latin), then there is nothing to stop it from becoming something else. We’re reminded of John A. Robinson positing for us that if we can change our thinking of God as being “up there” to “out there,” then we can start thinking of God in entirely different terms than “out there,” too. Surely, Geering emulates Robinson’s reasoning: if we can be as fast and free with the concept of God as one would have to be to create the doctrine of the trinity, then we can do almost anything! Non-theism is one of those “almost anything.”

Amongst the tectonic thinkers Geering notes is William of Ockham whose “razor” required that if an explanation for something could be made without bringing God into the question, then we’d best leave God out of it. Ockham, who explored the realities of his existence in the 13th century, couldn’t possibly have foreseen the impact of his words on the understanding of God but they are startlingly clear to us. Simply put, as science has been able to explain more and more of what we experience in the world, God is needed less and less as an explanatory factor. Indeed, when we can understand the evolution of any life-form as the simple trial and error progressions exposed in Richard Dawkins’, *The Blind Watchmaker*, there is little reason for us to hold onto God as explanation at all.

In truth, Ockham had also introduced the notion that ideas were the creation of those who had them. They do not exist distinctly awaiting our discovery but, rather, come into being through our own creative efforts. Again, Ockham could not possibly have had the clarity of vision that would have allowed him to extrapolate the application of his thinking to the concept of God. He lived in a world very different from ours. But Geering takes note and assigns him a place of esteem in the transition of Christianity from theism to non-theism. – Rev. Vosper

29. Once freed from a particular idea or definition of God, Rev. Vosper posits that there are then many ways in which to describe the idea of God.

Free to create

Once we recognize that it is absolutely acceptable, if not necessary, to explore beyond the idea of god as a being, we can come up with all sorts of ways of thinking about god (if we still want to, that is) that are unorthodox, that is, not protected by the church. We might, for instance, consider that god is what exists between two people, you and me, perhaps. Whatever we choose to honour what exists between us, we strengthen the god in our world; if we desecrate our relationship, we do the opposite. It’s up to us.

Or we might think about god as everything that is good in the world. We often do, anyway. Life will be good or bad, and we might try to think of god as only being the good stuff, and the bad as something else. The church used to tell us that it was Satan, or more likely, human nature; I don't buy it and, I warrant, neither do you. Sure, we screw up, but the idea that we are evil by our very essence seems deeply wrong. Restrict access to that kind of *mea culpa* thinking. Make it one of the things from which the church must protect us. It's too easy. There is just too much bad stuff that isn't anybody's fault—like tsunamis and category 4 and 5 hurricanes, earthquakes that wipe out whole populations. It's not possible for us to take responsibility for all of that and, without access to that theistic all-powerful God (remember, the church in this imagined scenario is preventing us from falling back on the old answers and starting to force us to think differently) we have nothing to blame. So we are left with the responsibility of facing even the bad stuff with whatever strength and courage we can muster, as confounding as it is, and holding each other through the worst of it, counting on each other for finding and creating enough good stuff to get us through the night and into the next day. If that's the case, we're strengthening god, building god up in the world, one little act or smile at a time.¹ – Rev. Vosper

30. This freedom to engage with a variety of different ideas concerning the concept of God was again part of Rev. Vosper's theological education.

While at theological college, I was not taught to engage god as a being or expected to deepen my relationship with that being in the way in which those I know who attended evangelical theological seminaries were encouraged to do. I read, explored, and considered the *concept* of god and the many ways in which others had engaged it whether they understood god to be a being or not. Concepts are human constructions which cannot exist without the human mind.

Because my evangelical colleagues and my liberal and progressive colleagues all use the word “god” to describe their own personal understanding of that word, it is difficult to engage without further explanation. – Rev. Vosper

31. For Rev. Vosper, ‘God’ is a symbolic word, a metaphor for an often personal - and not necessarily universal - understanding of the concept of God. This concept of God as a symbol is an idea that frequently appears in the aforementioned Lloyd Geering's work.

God is a symbolic word...it has no external referent which is open to public confirmation. The word ‘God’ has become a functional term whose content

¹ Excerpt from excerpt from Rev. Vosper's 2008 publication *With or Without God: Why the Way We Live is More Important than What We Believe*.

depends on what we (subjectively) put into it, and this process...had its beginnings in the bible, where the prophets denied the objective reality of the gods but retained the word 'God' for that to which Israel should give its allegiance...God is not a word which has ever had one fixed meaning for all people.

Whether any of us continues to use the word god or not has now become a matter of personal choice...There is no necessity for us to use the word 'god'. It is not even essential for us to use it in order to talk about faith. If we do use the word, we open ourselves to misunderstanding and confusion...It certainly does not mean for me what it meant for the ancients, including even Jesus of Nazareth...or what it means for the traditional theists of today. I do not believe, for example, that the word is the name of a spiritual being who planned and created this universe and who keeps it in his control.

- Lloyd Geering, "Faith and doubt on the margins." Presented to the Sea of Faith Network (NZ) Conference, 4 October 1997, p 115 & 117.

32. Lloyd Geering further expanded his concept of a metaphorical or symbolic God as a term that could be used to connote a series of beliefs and actions as a guide for one's life.

"Theologian Gordon Kaufman suggested that the term 'God' could have a function in a secular word to denote 'an ultimate point of reference', so that 'To believe in God is to commit oneself to a particular way of ordering one's life and action. It is to devote oneself to working towards a fully humane world within the ecological restraints here on planet Earth, while standing in piety and awe before the profound mysteries of existence.' (Kaufman, In the face of mystery, p. 347) If indeed that defines 'belief in God' few would call themselves atheists...It must be conceded, however, that most people in the past assumed the descriptive definition and took the term 'God' to be the name of an objective, living, and thinking being" who created the world and still controls it, and with whom they communicated "on personal terms and expected to have their prayers answered."

- Lloyd Geering, "Faith and doubt on the margins." Presented to the Sea of Faith Network (NZ) Conference, 4 October 1997. p. 132

33. Rev. Vosper was also influenced by the work of John Shelby Spong, who also advanced a concept of God that moves beyond the traditional theistic conception of God.

There is no God external to life. God, rather, is the inescapable depth and center of all that is. God is not a being superior to other beings. God is the "ground of Being itself. And much flows from this starting place. The artifacts of the faith of the past must be understood in a new way if they are to accompany us beyond

the exile [life beyond traditional church), and those that cannot be understood differently will have to be laid aside. Time will inform us as to which is which.

...God is not external to life but is rather the Ground of life itself, the Being in which all being is rooted...Such a God is, however, not a theistic god. It is a God whose Being emerges as all being is enhanced, whose Life is revealed as all life is lived, whose Love is manifested as all love is shared, and whose identity is revealed when barriers are broken and community is formed.

Paul Tillich has suggested that God must be perceived not as a being – not even the supreme being or the supernatural being but rather as the ground of all being. The Ground of Being is not external to life. It is rather present in the being of things.”

- John Shelby Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile*, (1998). p. 70, 164-5

...

We today do not think in natural/supernatural categories. God is not for us a human parent figure...that worldview has passed away.

- John Shelby Spong, *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism* (1991), p. 236

34. Rev. Vosper's thinking has also been influenced by Jerome Stone whose work has sought to come up with another understanding or definition of "God".

Normally I prefer to use "sacred" or occasionally "divine" as an adjective or adverb. However, I find that other people (and I myself in the past) have used the term "God." So I have developed what I call a minimal definition of God for purposes of conversation and common worship, a translation device for communication between various religious voices: "God is the sum total of the ecosystem, community and person empowering and demanding interactions in the universe." Another way I have of speaking of God, when I have to, is to say, that: "God is the world perceived in its value-enhancing and value-attracting aspects." The term God can put an end to thinking, either in the fanaticism of belief or of unbelief. My point is that the theoretical term "the transcendent" and the devotional term "God" (minimally understood) share the same reference to situationally or relatively transcendent resources and challenges, a radical naturalization of the idea."

- Jerome Stone in "Is God Emeritus? The rebirth of a forgotten alternative"

35. Rev. Vosper has also been influenced by Don Cupitt whose work has directly engaged with the challenges of attempting to define God.

We have inherited and we still use an extraordinary miscellany of idioms, ways of thinking and speaking about God. Nothing guarantees in advance that they will

all fit together into one tidy systematic construction. Quite the opposite, for what we have is a jumble of fragments from kits acquired at different times in the past. Many pieces have been lost, and of those that survive some are more useful than others. No single logical thread ties them together. We have to try to make what we can out of them; but we must remember that the more pieces we incorporate the more ragged and unstable will be the thing we construct, so it may be better to leave a good deal of material unused in the interest of building something stronger, more coherent...people used to think that the Church or the Bible gave them a ready-made construction...today, though, our new sense of history and our closer study of the individual pieces has shown us that the Bible and the Christian tradition present us with something...which grew slowly over many years with some substantial additions, and also many small losses that went unnoticed...

God is...not a personal god...but a spiritual and consciousness-raising conception...truly transcendent...gradually the cozy objective personal god of the past is expelled and replaced by the more spiritual and demanding concept. The shift is oddly difficult to describe. We can try various vocabularies, moving from heteronomous to autonomous faith, from a realist to non-realist conception of God, from a metaphysical to an existential faith, from an external God to a God within...and so on...all are unsatisfactory...a long process of refinement or purification...Call God a transcendent and unvarying reference-point for assessing human life whose potency lies precisely in the fact that he is not part of this changing world...call him a pure guiding spiritual idea; or cut out the personal pronouns altogether and speak only of a religious imperative: whatever your preference, it is hard to find the right words for God who is not an objective being, not a person, and does not exist as things exist...For God traditionally has two sets of attributes, the metaphysical and the moral. The metaphysical attributes decisively separate him from the world of fact, insisting that he is not in space or time and has no body, parts or feelings. In short, he is like a pure ideal; and his moral attributes also remove him from the world of fact. Thus he is love, period. Not any particular love, neither an object-selecting love nor a selectable love-object, but love simple, universal and objectless – and therefore not himself an object. Indeed, the Christian ideal of love as universal, disinterested and selfless rules out the notion that God can be an objective personal being, because he cannot be thought of as one who is singled out from others as the preferred love-object, nor as one who himself singles out preferred objects of his love. So the ideal of love requires the decentering of God; and so also it is with God's other attributes of justice, wisdom, beauty, goodness, and the rest.

- Don Cupitt in *Radical Theology*, chapter entitled: "God beyond objectivity", p. 67-69

36. Both the work of Don Cupitt and Lloyd Geering have gained further exposure to wider audiences as a result of the work of Nigel Leaves, who wrote:

[T]o outline what I perceive to be the most crucial area of religious discourse for the New Millennium – what I have called the “God problem”. Reduced to its simplest terms, the issue is whether to adopt a realist or non-realist understanding of God. Is God real or simply a symbol of our ultimate concern? ... I have used the writings of Don Cupitt and Lloyd Geering as templates for non-realism... I incline toward non-realism; the reason is that I find it the most intellectually compelling reading of Christianity. I am nonetheless poignantly aware that we, myself included, whose cultural roots are in Western Christianity, find it emotionally difficult to throw off the final vestige of belief in a being, essence, or principle greater than ourselves.”

...[W]hat does it mean to say that one has experienced the God-presence? Its very subjectivity calls into question the objectivity of which it claims to speak. How dependable is religious experience? ... [T]he phenomenon is not necessarily as trustworthy as its advocates suppose. “

- Nigel Leaves, *The God Problem: Alternatives to Fundamentalism*. Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 2006, p. 77, 81

37. Within The United Church of Canada, Rev. Vosper has spoken with various other ministers on their definitions of God. Rev. Vosper was privileged to speak with the Very Reverend Marion Pardy, whose Ministry at Gower Street United in St. John, Newfoundland, included a sermon which engaged with the difficulty of determining a singular definition of God. The Very Reverend Pardy shared the following excerpt from her sermon with Rev. Vosper.

We use words and metaphors for God, such as the best that we know in “father”, the best that we know in “mother”, the best that we know in “friend” or at “Immortal, Invisible, God only Wise”. Psalm 23 rolls off the lips of some of us within a certain age and stage; it is the most requested Bible reading at funerals; people in hospital frequently request it for it speaks of comfort and strength at fearful and lonely times. We hear good news in God as a Good Shepherd. Few of us, I expect, view God, as some of us did as children, as an old man or some other personage or supernatural Being in the sky, controlling and ordering the affairs of earth, and, to my fear as a child, recording all the “bad” things I was doing! Without having definite words, we are apt to think of God as Presence or Peace, as Love, as Source of Life, etc. But words, metaphors, and music, drama and dance, art and the artistic are our only tools to describe the “indescribable”.
- The Very Reverend Marion Pardy, “What about God and Jesus ...?” Sermon delivered at Gower Street United Church, St. John’s Newfoundland, April 17, 2016.

38. Rev. Vosper has endeavored to make her use of the term God clear and “barrier-free” throughout her Ministry and has done so with the support of her congregants at West Hill United Church.

Part V: Rev. Vosper’s Ministry at West Hill United Church

39. West Hill is a congregation with a progressive history of identifying, examining and removing barriers which inhibit participation by congregants in their church.

West Hill is a congregation that has continually engaged in open dialogue, whether its clergy at the time have been theologically more conservative or more liberally inclined. Of great importance has been to keep in close touch with the wider culture in which we all live, and identify what about the way we communicate might act as barriers to participation to those outside the church. Each time barriers have been identified, West Hill has worked hard to eliminate them. – Rev. Vosper

40. This history of eliminating barriers began in the mid-1980s by removing physical barriers.

In the mid-1980s, the Rev. Tom Gilchrist led the congregation through a physical renovation which removed physical barriers to participation. (And, thankfully, the brick wall which obscured the choir when they sat down!) An installation of exterior ramps and an elevator made the mid-century building accessible at a time when many other congregations were unable to do so. – Rev. Vosper

41. By the mid-1990s, West Hill progressed to removing the barriers caused by the use of gender-exclusive language.

In the mid-1990s, the Rev. Bruce Sanguin encouraged and supported the congregation in removing of barriers caused by gender-exclusive language. At the end of the work undertaken by the Worship Committee and shared with and approved by the congregation, the responses to the reading of scripture had evolved from “This is the word of the Lord” to “This is the witness of God’s people: Thanks be to God.” In the same vein, the Lord’s Prayer was amended to begin with the phrase “Our loving God”. – Rev. Vosper

42. Rev. Vosper began her ministry at West Hill in 1997. A few years later, West Hill began to look at ways in which theistic language acts as a barrier to participation in the church.

In 2001, we began addressing the barrier to participation the use of theistic language in all the elements of the service was for the many in the congregation and beyond who did not hold a belief in god as a supreme being who lived in heaven, intervened in human affairs, and would rule the earth. We began the work of removing that barrier by focusing on the values we wished to live out in our community and in our personal lives. Those values, which were supported by our Christian heritage, were congruent with the values shared by all people of goodwill and have been the basis for our work over the past fifteen years. They provided not a barrier, but a bridge, a bridge that many have used to re-enter the church, or enter it for the first time in their lives. – Rev. Vosper

43. From there, West Hill engaged in a thorough review of the Sunday service program, with an eye to identifying and removing additional barriers to participation.

In 2012, having recognized that the traditional Sunday morning church service type gatherings are another barrier to participation, the congregation, working with a consultant, created a program designed to ensure that the key elements it had identified as sacred to human community would be shared broadly and handed to subsequent generations. We envisioned the program as a template that could be recreated in any setting using the resources of the wider community in which it was being implemented. The barrier we met in this area was solely our own financial constraints, and we were deeply disappointed when the Presbyteries of Toronto Conference Corporation declined our request for grant money to develop this template project as they considered it to be the development of a secular organization. – Rev. Vosper

44. The review of West Hill's Sunday service program was catalyzed by a two-year undertaking which involved visits to nearly every congregation in the Toronto South Presbytery, with the goal of engaging members of the denomination on their core values and beliefs in order to build stronger relationships between the Presbytery and congregations. Rev. Vosper played a key role in leading this program. Throughout the course of this program, Rev. Vosper repeatedly confronted the realization that the typical theistic language found at traditional Sunday services created barriers to understanding. This experience is documented in the below excerpt from Rev. Vosper book, *Amen* (2011).

Several years ago, I helped lead a program that, over the course of two years, engaged members of my denomination in congregational workshops about core

values and core beliefs. I can credit that program for much of the work in which I've subsequently been involved. Some of the workshops sought to get at the beliefs individuals hold. Which core beliefs (conscious or not) buried within their Christian tradition informed their choices and their ideas about what was sacred? Out of the process, my co-facilitator and I came to recognize a huge discrepancy between what we, as theologically trained church leaders, understood about Christianity, and what those we engaged in conversations seemed to understand. In uncanny numbers, unless participants had some theological training or had spent time working closely with others who did, they had what I would call an "elementary" understanding of Christianity.

...

What my colleague and I noted during our core beliefs program was that although we, as clergy, believed we were passing contemporary scholarship on to our congregations, people, for some reason, weren't picking up on it. Despite the theologically liberal or even progressive non-theistic perspective of many clergy, Christianity in the minds and hearts of most churchgoers remains the Christianity of their Sunday school classes. With no information to shift their understanding—private conversations with clergy, continuing education, or an exposure to contemporary scholarship on Christianity—most believe what they've always believed. God lives in heaven. He sent Jesus to live on earth. While on earth, Jesus, who is really God, was also really human. Some believe that he died for "our sins," others that he was put to death because he fought for justice. Sin is described in vague, Ten Commandment-type references, rather than in relation to our complicity in the world's ills. If we go to heaven, we will be with God, Jesus, and all the relatives we have loved. If we don't ... well, we don't generally talk about that, preferring instead a bit of fuzziness around the doctrines of hell and the "finally impenitent." And all of this is somewhere in the Bible—the Holy Bible, the word of God, God's word to us, TAWOGFAT (The Authoritative Word of God for All Time)—which is known to be an old book and so is believed to be the best book, or at least a very good one. What I learned over the course of those two years was that clergy, although trained in critical scholarship and fully cognizant of the human construction of the Bible, simply weren't getting the message across. The people in the pews in front of us didn't know what we knew, even though we thought we'd been telling them for years. What was that all about?

I returned to my congregation determined to figure out what was blocking my message from getting to the people I so wanted to reach. It didn't take long to figure it out. In fact, I started my next Sunday with it: the opening prayer. Well, the opening prayer and pretty much everything that followed it.

You see, the whole Sunday morning thing continues to unfold according to a traditional theological paradigm, an old core narrative. The readings, the prayers, the hymns, the wording on the offering envelopes, the person in the fancy clothes up front assumed to be the only one in the room with special access to God. It didn't matter what I believed or what I was saying, as long as everything else

reinforced that old, old story—that God in heaven, who is holy, almighty, all-knowing, and everywhere, is going to keep us safe, somehow, now and in the end. Because God is. God does. God helps. God cares. God loves. God blesses. God saves. God punishes (yes, we need to include this). God guides. God answers. God promises. It's God we pray to and God that responds. This is the story of elementary Christianity, and it comes from the Bible (although it's nestled in there among less flattering descriptions of God and God's activities). However, close all that comes, or doesn't come, to your understanding of god, it perfectly matches much of the language in the prayers and hymns and biblical readings used in the average church. And long after people forget a minister's message, or even the minister herself, they still remember the Lord's Prayer, the favourite old hymns, and the memorized Psalm or Bible verse. When I realized that—and it was a watershed moment for me—nothing was the same. It couldn't be. – Rev. Vosper²

45. This program not only precipitated West Hill's review and revision of their Sunday service programming, but it also led to Rev. Vosper's deliberate approach of asking people what they mean by the term 'God'. Further, Rev. Vosper began to explicitly define theistic terms used throughout her ministry.

I often find it helpful for people to complete the following sentence in order for me to get an idea of what it is they are speaking about when they refer to God. "When I use the word 'god', I mean ..." As well, when speaking with groups across Canada and the U.S., and overseas, or connect on social media or email, and I'm asked what I believe, I am eager to share the concept of god that began in my early church settings, developed for and by me during my theological education and I have continued to develop through my reading, continuing education, sharing with colleagues and congregants, and my practice of ministry. I had written it out for a member of our congregation some weeks ago who then shared it at a meeting of the congregation with the Congregational Health Team of Toronto Southeast Presbytery in May, 2016 - I understand it was also shared with members of Toronto's Annual Meeting of Conference in Midland.

"When I use the word "god", I mean that which we create between us that is beautiful, worthy of us, and that raises up and honours our human dignity. When we create those kinds of relationships - with ourselves, others, the world around us, the stuff we interact with - we "create god" in the world. And what we create empowers and strengthens us, gives us courage in the face of challenges, offers us solace in times of sorrow and hurt, and convicts us when we fall beneath our own standards. It has a powerful impact on us. But we are its creators; it did not create us and, indeed, cannot survive without us.

² This excerpt is from an unedited manuscript which may or may not be identical to the final publication.

“And, of course, we can create the opposite, too, by using one another for our own ends, not respecting and cherishing what we own, not honouring the beauty of who we are, ourselves. That has the opposite impact and drains our resources, our energy, our world. In a way, you could call that evil and it, too, has great power.”

- Rev. Vosper

46. This focus on the power of language, both to inform and misinform, is part of a long thread going as far back as her formative years in Sunday School and her formal training at theological college. In Rev. Vosper’s view, “[t]he purpose of language is to communicate; when it is obscure – whether intentionally or otherwise – understanding is compromised. We are left with the idea that something is a mystery, beyond the limitations of our own minds even though we are the creators of that mystery.”

47. By being clear about the definitions behind the concepts used in her Ministry, Rev. Vosper was attempting to make her Ministry intelligible to the members of West Hill. This evolution however was not born of a different understanding of the concept of God; rather, Rev. Vosper was making transparent the particular uses and definitions of commonly used theological terms.

When I look back on the time in my ministry when I used the word “god” regularly, even though I was using it in a non-theistic sense, I am able to fit my present understanding comfortably back into most of the ways in which it was used by me and continues to be used by the church. What happened was simply that I came to see I had been largely unaware of how misleading things could be. Though I would be speaking of God in a non-theistic sense, many heard me talking of a personal all-loving, all-wise God who intervened in human lives. It is not that I decided I wanted to disabuse them of that view, much less evangelize other churches towards non-theism. I simply wanted to be clear about what I meant, about the concept that I hold myself accountable for. Although in my description above there is acknowledgment of agency, it is not an agency that is independent of us. The god we create by loving one another cannot reach out and hold me or direct me to look in a certain direction for what I need; it cannot answer my prayers or requests, nor can it heal me. It can’t even find my keys for me. It does not exist until we bring it into being and exists solely because we do, in the same sense that love exists as a word whether we practice it or not, but only comes to life when we live it. I therefore do not want to be interpreted by others as espousing a concept of God as an independent agency, or I am inadvertently promising and

assuring them of certain outcomes I cannot be accountable for. But when I do call upon the above concept of god, whether or not I use the word, when I bring it to the forefront of my mind and heart, it most certainly encourages and strengthens me as I interact in the world. It is behind my choices; it is in my holistic make-up. I hold myself accountable for living that way, and in the same sense of integrity, can be held accountable for representing god that way. Over and over, people share that this sense of god works for them in their personal and community lives, inspiring, challenging, and transforming them in their relationships in ways that a concept of an external god, god as a being, did not do. – Rev. Vosper

48. West Hill's evolution towards barrier-free participation in the Church was not made unilaterally by Rev. Vosper. Indeed, this evolution was a consequence of an involved, supportive and eager congregation at West Hill. To this day, the congregation at West Hill remains steadfastly supportive of Rev. Vosper and views their relationship with their minister as a covenant that began in 1997 and which remains unbroken to this day. In their own separate written submissions to the interview committee, the congregation has offered their view through the Board Chair, Randy Bowes.

We welcome this opportunity to present our unyielding support for Rev. Gretta Vosper by offering our perspective on the review and our relationship with Gretta, providing some clarification around West Hill and our evolving theology, and responding to challenges that have been voiced about our place within the United Church of Canada.

In 1997 Scarborough Southeast Presbytery, the congregation of West Hill, and Gretta Vosper entered into a covenant. The members of West Hill have taken a very active role in enriching and supporting this covenant. In 2004 we created a document we call VisionWorks that articulates our shared values and reflects what we hold to be of utmost significance in our community life. It calls us to examine ourselves in light of these values as we set priorities and make decisions, both individually and as a community. This document was created by members of our congregation and was affirmed by our Presbytery at its 2005 oversight meeting. Our covenant remains strong and has not been broken. In living out that covenant, Gretta meets and exceeds our standards of effectiveness. – Excerpt from West Hill Statement

49. Mr. Bowes goes on to note that West Hill has a long history of being on the forefront of progressive theology, influenced by the intellectual underpinnings found in the works of numerous theologians and scholars.

Almost throughout our 66-year history, West Hill United Church has been on the forefront of progressive theology, many of our congregants have grown in knowledge of biblical critique as a result of yearly book studies of works by John Shelby Spong, Bart Ehrman, John Dominic Crossan, Marcus Borg, Tom Harpur, Elaine Pagels, and Riane Eisler, for example. And, like Gretta, many of us are products of the United Church's *New Curriculum*. When Gretta was called to West Hill, the Search Committee conscientiously sought candidates that were progressive in their theology and selected Gretta as we recognized in her the leadership qualities we sought to help us push the envelope of what church could mean in the coming years. – Excerpt from West Hill Statement

50. A significant point of frustration for the congregation at West Hill has been the fact that this review process has interfered with the congregation's relationship with their chosen Minister. West Hill's written submissions make clear that the evolution of service at West Hill was not a unilateral decision; rather, the congregants were active participants in creating the West Hill of today.

She has done that both through her own development as a minister and also by being emboldened by this very congregation to align our values, language, and Sunday services to better reflect contemporary progressive understandings and a focus on non-exclusive gatherings. It is vital to understand that this was not done in isolation by Gretta but in conjunction and coordination with the congregation and the Board of West Hill. Gretta has never acted unilaterally in any of these decisions but sought the advice or consent of the Board. West Hill and Gretta were – and are – inextricably galvanized in this work.

We believe it is essential to recognize that when the congregation called Gretta we embraced her progressive value-centered views because they aligned with how the congregation itself viewed and embraced the concept of god. When she began using the label atheist rather than non-theist, in solidarity with Bangladeshi bloggers who were being murdered for their secular perspectives, the congregation again supported her and indeed, there are many here who would align themselves with the fundamental issues at hand. – Excerpt from West Hill Statement

51. Further, West Hill maintains that although the Toronto Conference is endeavoring to review Rev. Vosper's "effectiveness", that it is *West Hill* that is in the best position assess the Rev. Vosper's "effectiveness".

Effectiveness is measured by outcomes and we are the ones best suited to measure those because we are the ones to set the goals and objectives for our congregation – and yet we have never been approached regarding our vision, our strategies, our objectives or the effectiveness of our minister.

...

Respectfully, if you have concerns about Gretta, then you have questions with us as congregation members. Because we view the United Church as our home, this feels very much like family members marginalizing and dismissing us. It is both hurtful and harmful and, given our covenant with Gretta, sets a dangerous precedent. We raise this issue not as a way to create leverage. Rather, we believe it is crucial that we identify this hurt and allow it into this space in order to name and legitimize our deep sense of betrayal in the way this process has been undertaken and carried out. We further believe it is important for you to be aware of this hurt and help carry the burden as something that the Conference has created and must mitigate. – Excerpt from West Hill Statement

52. Though the congregation at West Hill has moved towards a barrier-free Church, the community remains open to individuals of all theistic perspectives.

Our congregation itself is formed with roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition and we embrace theists, agnostics and atheists. Many here would agree with the 24% of the ministers responding to a 2011 United Church Observer survey who indicated their belief in god was wholly dependent on how god was defined. That is to say, we are a congregation diverse in our beliefs yet embracing the groundedness, guidance, and growth experienced through living in right relationship with ourselves, each other and the planet. This is manifested through Gretta's ministry, our own connection with each other, and by our focus on non-exclusive services. We are brought together by a desire to belong to a community of shared values that seeks to make a difference in the world, rather than through beliefs that divide. West Hill is a vibrant and growing church, celebrating the joys and triumphs of our community on Sunday morning and sharing our burdens in times of need. - Excerpt from West Hill Statement.

53. West Hill's statement also directly addresses why West Hill, and by extension Rev. Vosper, wish to remain within The United Church of Canada.

Finally, many have voiced concern about why Greta and by association, our congregation, wish to remain within the United Church. We want to respond to this as a congregation. There are several reasons. The first is that many of us have very deep roots in the United Church of Canada, some of us for more than 70 years. It is our *home*. We believe in its ability to change the world for the better through its focus on social justice and its attention to issues relevant to Canada and the world. Others within our community have come to the United Church later and have embraced its values and focus on justice and have described the feeling as coming home.

We also recognize the UCC as a church of firsts; first church to ordain women, then married women, the first to have a woman moderator, the first to welcome LGBTQ folk as clergy, the first to recognize the tremendous harm done to indigenous peoples of Canada. We are proud to belong to a church that lifts up peace, seeks justice for the marginalized, supports equity, has a process of supporting sanctuary to those refugees who can only turn to churches as a last resort, and that walks in solidarity with other organizations seeking these same goals. At West Hill, we lift up these values as well and our outreach is focused on many of these same concerns. These include our First Nation's Study Group which, among many other projects, worked tirelessly to bring the gap in funding and the living conditions of indigenous people to the attention of local representatives of the previous federal government. Our outreach also includes support for a Bangladeshi refugee family, provision of sanctuary to those who have nowhere else to turn, local community outreach, voting unanimously in 2009 to become an Affirming Ministry, and support for the M&S fund of the UCC.

We also believe strongly that the United Church of Canada is a big tent, big, bold, and strong enough to embrace those whose beliefs are on the margin of both conservative and liberal or progressive values. We have not heard of congregations or ministers being reviewed when their beliefs adhere to more evangelical, literal, and dogmatic systems, yet there is ample room in the UCC for those groups. By the same token, West Hill United and Greta have always had a place within the fold, and should continue to do so.

We have been assured by presbytery and conference that if Greta should be placed on the Discontinued Service List, the West Hill congregation will remain. Yet Greta is a doorway to many who are averse to church for a number of reasons, not the least of which is compliance to doctrines that can be restrictive to those who are looking for an ethical, values based approach to living in right relationship with themselves, each other, and the planet. The congregation of West Hill and Greta Vosper are walking along the same path bound together by the values of love, compassion, integrity and a quest for justice. These of course are the deepest values of Christians as well as others seeking to live a life of right relationship. - Excerpt from West Hill Statement.

54. In a similar vein, Rev. Vosper remains of the belief that The United Church is best placed to evolve in light of its history of progressive change. Rev. Vosper saw in The United Church of Canada a healthy tradition of re-examining and re-interpreting doctrine for a contemporary world.

Early in the history of our union, The United Church was already identifying itself as distinct from its past. At the same time, it was its fervent wish to remain faithful to that past in a way that presented the distinguishing marks of the faith's central message in a relevant contemporary way.

Christianity, from the day of Pentecost to this day, has been a continuous experience of God's saving work in Christ. Through this experience, the Christian Church came into being; and by this experience it has continued to exist. There has been an evangelical succession throughout the ages, leading onward from the Apostles to our own day and generation. We are the heirs of that great spiritual heritage, to which our predecessors (*sic*), in their knowledge of Christ, have made by their faith and life, continuous and increasing contribution.

- T. B. Kilpatrick, *Our Common Faith*. (UCPH: Toronto, 1928) p. 66-67

The changes the United Church has instituted over the course of its history have been planned and embraced in the tradition of reiterating the core of the Christian faith for a contemporary world. That is what happened at Nicaea and afterward as the doctrine of the Trinity cohered, solidified, and became immutable. That is what happened which the newly excommunicated reformers set down their beliefs and codified their aims during the Protestant Reformation. That is what happened when Methodists, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists came together to create a united Protestant presence in Canada in the early days of the twentieth century.

Even so, T. B. Kilpatrick, in *Our Common Faith*, written shortly after union, felt the need to remind us why we needed new doctrinal statements, warning of the insincerity of adopting those set out for previous generations.

How is The United Church related to the Creeds, which the Church has drawn up from time to time, and which have been the means, whereby the Church has made plain to itself its faith in Christ, and has made confession of that faith before man? It would not be a fair answer to that question, for a modern church simply to repeat the language of the creeds, or even to adopt one of them as its own.

Such action would not be intelligent, and could scarcely be sincere. A church which claims to stand to that substance of the faith, which is the abiding essence of Christianity, and which found expression, age after age, in the great creeds of the universal church. This loyalty, moreover, must not be a mere lip service. The church must be prepared, when need arises, to give utterance to its faith, in the language and the forms of present-day

experience and reflection, and to show that, in these, it has conserved all that is vital and permanent in the creeds of the past. (Kilpatrick, p. 67-68.)

- Rev. Vosper.

Part VI: Concluding Remarks

55. Although the process leading up to Rev. Vosper's interview on June 29, 2016 has been challenging and at times painful not only for Rev. Vosper, but also the congregants at West Hill, Rev. Vosper remains open to the process and has made submissions in that spirit. Rev. Vosper remains hopeful that her review will spur The United Church of Canada towards inclusion rather than exclusion, plurality instead of singularity of belief, and intellectual freedom over dogma.

REV. VOSPER'S WRITTEN
SUBMISSION

Part I: Introduction

1. Thank you for the opportunity to provide some materials I consider useful as background for your review of the effectiveness of my ministry within The United Church of Canada, specifically in relation to the continuing affirmation of the questions asked of me at my ordination.

A. Questions of Ordination

2. The questions sent to me by David Allen, Executive Secretary of Toronto Conference and taken from the Basis of Union, section 11.3, will be the focus of this submission although they differ from the questions I was asked at my ordination in 1993 in Pembroke by Bay of Quinte Conference. The actual questions I was asked were an adaptation that did not include the classical Trinitarian formula. I have included them in the Appendices along with photographs of the bulletin. In order to ensure that the review process is considered suitable to Toronto Conference, I will respond to the questions sent to me by David Allen and trust that the Conference will ensure that, in its report of this review, it will make it known that these questions differ from the ones I answered in 1993.

3. The questions, found in section 11.3 of the Basis of Union of The United Church of Canada, as pertain to candidates being queried prior to ordination currently read as follows:

- i. Do you believe in God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and do you commit yourself anew to God?
- ii. Do you believe that God is calling you to the ordained ministry of Word, Sacrament, and Pastoral Care, and do you accept this call?

- iii. Are you willing to exercise your ministry in accordance with the scriptures, in continuity with the faith of the Church, and subject to the oversight and discipline of The United Church of Canada?
- 4. In order to deal effectively with all that is included in these three questions posed to ordinands, I have organized them into sections for greater clarity:
 - i. Do you believe in God?
 - i. God
 - ii. God, The Trinity
 - iii. God, the Father
 - iv. God, the Son
 - v. God, the Holy Spirit
 - ii. Commitment to God
 - i. Call to Ordained Ministry
 - ii. Ministry of the Word
 - iii. Understanding of the Sacraments
 - iv. Understanding of Pastoral Care,
 - v. Acceptance of call
 - iii. Exercise of ministry
 - i. Exercise of ministry in accordance with the scriptures
 - ii. Exercise of ministry in continuity with the faith of the Church
 - iii. Exercise of ministry subject to the oversight and discipline of The United Church of Canada?

B. Submission Format

5. This submission of background material has been organized chronologically to show the development of my understanding and articulations of theological concepts. It begins with my education in a United Church Children and Youth Sunday School program, extends through my education and training at Queen's Theological College and ordination by Bay of Quinte Conference, and concludes with the educational journey I have shared with my present Pastoral Charge, West Hill United Church. It is my invitation to you to recognize within these pages my development as a United Church individual and leader.

6. Because the overall format is organized chronologically, all topics listed in the outline are not represented in every section, e.g., I don't cover pastoral oversight in the section on my early years.

Part II: Formative Years (1964-1974)

A. God

7. My parents were active members of Sydenham Street United Church in Kingston, Ontario, and it was in this family and this church's Sunday School that I was first taught and invited to explore ideas about God. The challenge, of course, was to translate what we found in ancient stories into real world settings. My teachers, with the use of a new contemporary curriculum and the support of ministers who validated of contemporary methods of exploration, offered us the material and the opportunity to ask questions, and guided us through our study of the complexities of Christian teaching. Biblical stories were mined for evidence of a pattern that would portray God's nature and activity. Beyond the idea of God being loved, there were complexities. God was a creator but not the only creator; the myth of the biblical creation stories was juxtaposed with other mythic creation stories. God was a provider but not in the sense of meeting our every need,

or without our participation in the process, and even with our best efforts, many basic needs were not met. God helped us divide actions, choices, and consequences into good and bad by teaching us to look for love in the input and the outcome of events. God was a catalyst for action, speaking through men (mostly) who were then able to stand up to powerful people and systems and attempt to make change.

8. Amidst these complexities, my greatest learning was that whatever it was God specifically wanted me to do or be, I was going to have to figure it out for myself. No amount of biblical exploration would stipulate those roles specifically for my individual life, but I saw that work was yet to be done, for I could see that the world hadn't found its way to the kind of peace we were taught God wanted to bring about. As long as that was true, the choice, in my limited understanding, was to try to do that work and, in so doing, I would be putting myself in alignment with what God was also trying to do.

9. The final chapter of the New Curriculum's intermediate level book, *God Speaks through People* by Frank H. Morgan emphasized the importance of decision and action: "What Are You Going to Do About It?" He presented the need to respond to whatever it was that God needed you to do, pointing out that if you shirked the responsibility, God would simply find someone else. God's work, he argued, isn't going to be thwarted by a shirker. He also cautioned us that if we did shirk, we might never find the kind of contentment we'd seen in the stories we'd read in the class. "Think of those who did respond. Moses, Mary, David, Deborah, Nehemiah, Lydia, Stephen, Peter. They did not have an easy life, but they had a thrilling one. God has a task for you. What are you going to do about it?" And with that, Morgan set before us a challenging journey.

B. God, the Trinity

10. The concept of the Trinity in *The New Curriculum* was covered in *Project World* by R. C. Chalmers. There, the difficulty of understanding what the Trinity meant was addressed head on. I realize that, for many, the Trinitarian formula continues as a worthy theological construct and symbol of relationship in community; however, a concept that is acknowledged to be, itself, very difficult to explain has limitations for clarifying approaches and solutions for the contemporary challenges for community. In *Project World*, Chalmers acknowledged that "Attempts to speak about the doctrine of the Trinity sound like theological double-talk to people outside (and many inside) the church. The things we say about it are not logical, so they sound like nonsense." He attempted, nevertheless, to convince us of its merit by pointing out that "there are many things in life that go beyond logic, and yet we do not reject them. Love, for instance, especially love for someone who doesn't seem to deserve it, is not logical. But it happens, and it is genuine and a force to be reckoned with. " (p. 125) Love, however, while it is certainly complex in its challenges and costs, is not a basically illogical concept such as he was acknowledging the Trinity to be. Metaphors help give words to love's deeper meanings and experiences, but to deepen our understanding, not to explain the basic meaning of the concept of love. We don't experience the Trinity directly as we do love. We were left guessing about it even after explanations had been made. I am certain, however, that Chalmers was not arguing for the acceptance of all things illogical based on his reasoning that the way we love sometimes isn't.

11. Throughout my Sunday School education, it was often suggested that the very fact that many Christian beliefs are so unbelievably unbelievable, beyond the understanding of ordinary people, that they strongly suggest that something enormously profound must have happened to create them. Chalmers uses this argument to explain how the Trinity came into being within a religious belief system that was entirely monotheistic. In the centuries preceding Christianity, Jews

had acknowledged that monotheism daily in their recitation of the Sh'ma. To introduce a triune god into that belief system almost guaranteed failure if not death and many there were who were opposed to the doctrines that arose in the early years of Christianity.

12. We were shown that there are only two direct and two oblique references to the Trinity in the Bible and were taught that the doctrine itself was generally understood to be an extra-biblical doctrine. (During my theological training, the two direct references were argued by one biblical scholar to have been created in order to mirror the "Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" benediction notable throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. In this same vein, West Hill's own development of liturgical elements also mirrors traditional ones but without exclusively theological language that requires extra explanation.

13. Chalmers presented the Trinity as an "attempt to bring together the three major ways in which we have experienced God," noting that every time we might try to form a picture of God, it would fall far short. He shared some of the many attempts to explain the Trinity throughout church history. As metaphor, we were presented with the idea of love as a stand-in for the three persons of the Trinity. Augustine "likened the Trinity to God the Father, the lover; Christ the Son, the beloved; the Holy Spirit, the love that unites them." (p.125) Again, it was love that was offered as an explanation of what was meant by the complex characters intertwined, separate, and yet into one thing.

14. We were offered the opportunity in our classes to consider the problems that arise when the "core truth" of the Bible was taken to be the *absolute* truth, to mean something other than it actually states, to be insufficient for addressing emerging needs over the centuries, and to be out of date and no longer relevant. As teenagers, we were exploring the Bible as a document that could, and should, be critiqued.

C. God as Father

15. Learning about the idea of God as a Father was, of course, an early part of my Christian upbringing. We were taught how the concept had been developed beyond understandings of God expressed previously in the Hebrew Scriptures (then known as the Old Testament). Beyond "God Most High," "Jehovah," the ultimate judge or arbiter of mercy, we learned that the idea of God as Father personalized Christianity in a new and important way. The Sunday School curriculum stressed that it was a metaphor that could be understood in different ways:

What did Jesus mean when he spoke of God as Father? What does it mean to us that God is our Father? The answer is to be found in the gospels, not only in what our Lord said, but just as much, in how he lived and put his own beliefs into action. Admittedly the word as a description of God is a metaphor. There is no other way of describing God except by metaphors and parables. Hardie, p. 175.

16. It was in this Senior Class at Sydenham Street Sunday School that I absorbed and assumed the idea that understanding God as Father meant understanding God as love. (You may recall the funky 1970s "Live Love" stickers that accompanied the curriculum.) The sections exploring the concept of God as Father used the idea of a father's love to personalize the relationship we were being encouraged to develop with God. The headings of the different sections wove the strands together in the tale: Love, Love Cares, Love Punishes, Love Forgives.

17. **LOVE:** In this section, the opening sentence reads "The first and greatest attribute of fatherhood is undoubtedly love." It continues:

To love means not any of the weakly sentimental things that the movies have attached to the word. It means to think, feel, and plan for others rather than for yourself. It means that the centre of gravity of life is no longer contained within your own personal and private pleasures and indulgences, but has moved out to include another or others.

We were being shown that the idea of God had evolved between the writing of the Hebrew Scriptures when God seemed to be all about himself and "the group" (railed against in subsequent

chapters) and had come to consider his "children" as individuals, each worthy of love and individual attentiveness. The concept had developed. We were being taught that we were important to God.

18. **LOVE CARES:** "The first thing that love means is caring. It is not self-centered, but holds someone else's interests more important than its own. This is the first thing that a father does for his family, and, says Jesus, it is also the primary thing that God does for us." Pushing beyond the idea of caring about a nation enough to provide it exclusive guidance and privilege, the New Testament idea of God as father brought that care to the individual level, beyond the previous emphasis on "group". Hardie argued that the metaphor, reinforced later by the Protestant Reformation, turned our attention to the needs of individuals, required that we see people, not just nations or "refugees", and that we act as individuals and not simply as a congregate, as "the church", and hope "the church" does something in response to need in the world. I believe that my commitment to the ideals of personal responsibility and accountability was crystallized in this classroom.

19. **LOVE PUNISHES:** In this section, we were re-introduced to the Old Testament understanding of God as the Judge, but with a more merciful nature added to the concept.

The love of God is a righteous love and necessarily includes an element of judgment, as does the love of any father who wants only the best for his children and will not accept anything less. ... Love is not merely an easy-going and tolerant amiability, or a sentimental attachment, void of moral values. It is a strong and positive force rooted in holiness, and expresses itself in judgment and at times in anger. The wrath of God is an integral part of his love.

Hardie included comments about judgments against anger noting that references to anger as a sin are related to human anger "which has a tendency to be sinful because it is rooted in a nature prone to pride, jealousy, and selfishness whereas the anger of God, springing from his holy and righteous nature, is always pure." Indeed, Hardie's words would have played a part in preparing my

conscience for the important work of Christian outrage when he noted "there are times when a Christian has a duty to be angry, when a mild amiability would be a betrayal of his faith."

20. **LOVE FORGIVES:** The senior curriculum worked to help us understand the importance of forgiveness and the way in which the idea of God the Father merged the two previous characteristics into the idea of forgiveness. "Put [care and anger] together and you discover God's forgiveness, the supreme proof of his love." In the light of the cross, Hardie wrote:

...forgiveness becomes something frightening. We dare not be presumptuous. And yet, is not this the genuine spirit of a father's love? Is it not true, even in our own poor, humble, human way that a father will go to any lengths for his children?

God's forgiveness, we were taught, was "neither easy nor automatic." Using the parable of the prodigal son, Hardie brought the story home to every teenager sitting on those stackable wooden chairs and chafing at the limitations imposed on us by our parents. God the Father was a metaphor we could work with, reinforced by the curriculum's emphasis on interpretation and reinterpreting – beyond God the Father, the metaphor worked for me as God is Love.

21. Continuing with the metaphor of God is Father, we are considered to be are siblings. (Of course, in 1964, we were all considered "brothers".) The curriculum shared images that continue to be relevant today, built on this idea of family.

The covenant fellowship is the symbol and the forerunner of future universal brotherhood. This is the thought that the New Testament takes up ... *The brotherhood exists among those who acknowledge Christ as Lord, and the Christian mission is to extend it outwards.*

This thought is worthy of serious study today because the curse of our world is divisions. Communism and democracy, black, yellow, and white, one race against another, this nation against that - the world is divided and cross-divided. Even within the church of Christ there are denominational and sectarian divergences. Our world is uneasily conscious of all these.

Organizations like the United Nations in the political field, World Health Organization or the International Labour Organization, World Council of Churches, all represent attempts to overcome the barriers that keep men apart.

All realize that it would be easy to over-simplify this whole matter. Differences are inherent in human nature, and it is by no means desirable that all men should be put on one level. Nothing more boring than universal uniformity could be imagined, whether in the church or elsewhere.

- But there can be differences - and brotherhood at the same time. Unity does not necessarily mean uniformity. When every man can say, "This is my brother - because he is a son of God," then all the variations of race, colour, politics, ideology, and denomination or creed fall into their proper perspective.
p. 183-184

22. Just as our use of the gender exclusive term "brotherhood" eventually widened into more inclusive language, so, too, did understandings of what ultimately could make possible the "unity" Hardie so desired. In today's pluralistic world, unity can no longer be confined to terms developed in ecumenical dialogue; it has become the subject of interfaith dialogue. And in an increasingly secular world, unity among all people cannot exist if only the religious are included. Perhaps, in today's world, Hardie would be rephrased thus: "This familial relationship exists among all those who acknowledge the supremacy of love and our mission is to extend it outwards." And further, "When everyone can say, 'This is my sister or brother because she/he is, like me, a human being worthy of love,' then all the variations of race, colour, politics, ideology, and denomination or creed fall into their proper perspective." Indeed, should Hardie still be alive and cognizant of the arguments against speciesism, many of them grounded in contemporary theologies, he may note that the importance of extending consideration to the worth of all life on the planet should soon make problematic the anthropocentrism inherent in the statement I have extrapolated from his original words. Were The New Curriculum still working to place important faith issues before Sunday School classes, I have no doubt it would be leading in this discussion.

D. God as Son

23. As Chalmers explained the problematic nature of the Trinity and shared the background which had led to its adoption as a centre piece of Christian dogma, he also outlined the ongoing nature of the problems which went far beyond those experienced by the earliest Christians. The problem of the incarnation has been struggled over throughout the course of Christian history and also presented a major challenge to the Seniors' class at Sydenham Street United Church. There, we balked at the idea that Jesus was God and human at the same time; it made no sense to our inquiring minds. Fortunately, Chalmers, even if he seemed to hold more conventional views himself, invited us to look beyond the rigid orthodoxy of our predecessors and directed us to explore the topic in the then recent book, *Honest to God*, by John A. T. Robinson.

24. Robinson gave us permission to let go of the God and Jesus problem that the incarnation presented, as he, himself, struggled with an inability to fuse God and human into one whole and deal with the theological implications of that. Robinson noted that the supranaturalistic understanding of the incarnation was most usually understood as God somehow coming to earth cloaked in humanity. To make his point, he quoted a much-loved Christmas carol: "Veiled in flesh the Godhead see." As long as there was a supranaturalistic interpretation of the incarnation, we were left with the idea of Jesus really being a god and so not really able to give we humans salvation. Jesus resurrected was no hope for humanity; he was a god. Of course, a god could be resurrected but we surely wouldn't. If "Jesus was really God almighty walking about on earth, dressed up as a man," ... if he "looked like a man, he talked like a man, he felt like a man, but underneath he was God dressed up - like Father Christmas" then we are left with "the impression that God took a space-trip and arrived on this planet in the form of a man. Jesus was not really one of us; but through the miracle of the Virgin Birth he contrived to be born so as to appear one of us. Really he came from outside." (*Honest to God*, p.66)

25. Robinson met the challenges inherent in a supranaturalist view by moving into what had been emerging in liberal theological circles, namely, the position that Jesus wasn't God, that there was no realm "out there" from which he had arrived, and that the whole idea of the incarnation of God was simply unbelievable. Suggesting we explore the idea of a god out there visiting the earth in the form of one of us as a myth, not a piece of history, Robinson also argued for the retention of the story of Jesus the man whose birth, life, teachings, and death, was "so beautiful and so true that he must have been a revelation, indeed, the supreme revelation, of God." We could understand the idea of "human raised to the power of x ." And even if the ramifications of a naturalistic Jesus weren't entirely understood by us, the idea of a natural, human Jesus who could lead us to see the world as sacred certainly was. This was the idea of Jesus that travelled with me to Queen's Theological College.

E. God as Holy Spirit

26. Our study of the Holy Spirit in The New Curriculum brought conflicting worldviews into juxtaposition as a way of helping us understand what struck us as the craziness of the story of Pentecost. In our senior texts, Hardie differentiated how we today in the West might describe something and how an "Eastern mind" might have described something then. He suggested that what is described as a physical wind and appearance of tongues of fire may have been an inward experience, a feeling, that was recounted in more vivid terms than we might have done. In the end, Hardie declined to explain definitively what happened at Pentecost but recognized the story as marking the starting point of the disciples' proclamation of their experiences of Jesus' promises to them, his subsequent crucifixion, and the resurrection they had witnessed. He returned over and again to the promise that Jesus would be with his disciples and eventually attributed the dramatic growth of the church to that presence, in the form of the Holy Spirit.

27. As a teenager, the permission to explore reasonable answers to what appeared to be incomprehensible stories was not only freeing but affirming of our own ability to think and consider meaning and values as we examined traditional texts. Sydenham Street United Church provided a safe place to study, question, interpret, and reinterpret. I was further encouraged to approach texts this way during my studies at Mount Allison University, including the courses on religion and culture and the history of the early church, where radical theologians such as Eldon Hay invited us to deconstruct the religion we had been handed - much of it already deconstructed in The New Curriculum - and create a religious worldview that engaged with contemporary culture in a relevant, appropriate, and life-giving way.

F. Understanding of Call

28. The New Curriculum addressed the idea of God calling to someone through an interpretation of the story of God's call to Moses. It noted that the term "call" is unfortunate because it suggests that there is "some dramatic experience, characterized by supernatural visions and voices." Rather, in *The Mighty Acts of God*, one of the senior level books in The New Curriculum, John B. Hardie suggested that a call is the equivalent of a conviction that one is aligned with God's "great purpose," which, as God and love were presented as equivalent, we understood as bringing peace and justice for all people. Where you could obtain details as to your particular place in God's "great purpose" was not as clear, suggesting that what one individual feels aligns him or her with God's great purpose might, indeed, be completely different, even contrary to what another might suppose it to be. (p. 42.)

G. Understanding of the Word

29. Early in my Sunday School education, I was exposed to the challenges inherent in the apparent contradictions between the Bible and contemporary science. The New Curriculum

presented the Bible as filled with stories which needed to be understood as parables. Hardie advised that:

It is off the track to say that Genesis is not true because science contradicts it. Science does not contradict it. It is not the truth of Genesis, but our understanding of it, which is at fault. If we try to take it literally, we miss the whole point and purpose. It is what an eminent biblical scholar has called a "parable" - "a story which may or may not be literally true (no one asks whether the Good Samaritan ever literally 'happened'); yet which conveys a meaning beyond itself (p. 18)

30. The New Curriculum addressed the existence of differing creation stories in the Bible:

The second story introduces the epic of men and their relations with God and between themselves. This story is not to be taken literally. Adam and Eve were never intended to be thought of as the actual parents of the human race. If we insist on this 'word for word' understanding, then at once we are landed in the midst of ridiculous difficulties such as the time-honoured question, where did Cain get his wife? ... It is an unmerited insult to the writer to suppose that he did not see such an obvious difficulty. In fact, he chose for his representative man the name "Adam," the Hebrew word for "every man" or humanity.

31. Even as the authors of the curriculum worked hard to present the concept of the Bible as two books joined together in their telling of the long history of God's activity in the world through his people, they reinforced our need to look beyond the literal to the mythic stories they were telling to try and express meaning in and for their lives. Perhaps the main takeaway from The New Curriculum in its examination of the Bible was this:

The stories in the first section of Genesis are not to be taken as any attempt at factual history or science. The Old Testament writers were concerned only with the lessons that history and science (as they understood it) had to teach. They were concerned less with facts than with the *interpretation* of facts. The worst mistake that could be made is to think of them as news-writers. They were not reporters on the staff of some ancient chronicle. If anything, they were editorial writers, who took the facts and interpreted them in the light of God's revelation. (p. 27)

They were attempting to relate their experience of God's presence with his people, something that was often hard to discern, given the content of many of the stories, seen as mythical or not.

Part III: Theological Education and Ordination

A. Theology and God

32. I entered the Masters of Divinity program at Queen's Theological College in 1987, when the study of theology was highly influenced by the movement to the centre of the previously marginalized voices of feminist theologians, the emergence of liberation theologies particularly as articulated by Catholic theologians, the opening up of conversations on diverse sexualities, and the revised approach to environmental stewardship. All these influenced the ongoing evolution of my concept of God.

33. Perhaps the most influential theologian to whose works I was introduced in my first year was Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. As a paleontologist and Jesuit priest, he built his work upon an understanding of the world as beginning much, much further back in time than the biblical account of its creation. Teilhard divided the ages of the world into different periods with their own "beginning": cosmogenesis - the beginning or birth of the universe; biogenesis - the birth of life; anthropogenesis - the birth of humans; and noogenesis - the birth of consciousness. He saw his faith as a significant element of things to come, a Christogenesis which he believed would ultimately emerge - the birth of an ultra synthesized humanity, the "Mystical Body of Christ". This he called the "Whole Christ." I included these concepts several years later in the submissions I made to Bay of Quinte Conference as part of my application for ordination.

34. For me, Teilhard's work fell within the same field of inquiry as the mystics, and my exploration of their work further altered what were already fluid ideas about God. Love's possibilities, a presence, the impetus for what could or would emerge, the emergence itself—these characteristics of what we kept calling God were pursued and pressed hard against the challenges of the inescapable reality of evil and suffering in the world, and rigid stances taken on morals as absolute and universal. Sallie McFague's *Models of God* encouraged me to explore the idea of god

amongst the mundane, completely freeing it from the necessity of a supernatural realm, a task begun when I had first read Teilhard's "Mass on the World".

35. We struggled with the impenetrable injustice in the book of Job and the lack of clarity both traditional and contemporary theologies brought to the wreckage of his life as we looked to that story to try to make sense of the injustices in the world. This, one of the most compelling stories in the Bible, seemed to justify pain and suffering as something God had a right to impose or at least allow at whim or to prove a point. Job was simply to accept his lot and continue to give God the glory. But Leonardo Boff and the conversations fueled by the horrible events unfolding in Nicaragua and El Salvador and the rise of base communities there would not allow acceptance of such an image. Boff fueled a vibrant, urgent, and very different telling of Christianity, setting amongst us the idea of a god that was crucified over and over again as people disappeared, violence reigned, and nations who prayed every Sunday morning sold weapons to those who killed for them in the name of profit. His *Ecclesiogenesis* inspired a whole new passion for the creation of communities where spirituality and resistance to abusive power and violence could be merged. Gustavo Gutierrez pressed us further, saturating the idea of salvation with the theme of liberation and arguing that nothing in any afterlife could outweigh the right to liberation in this life, regardless of the biblical references to God-given privileges to which those in power could point. There could be no theology without liberation; for Gutierrez the two were inextricably intertwined.

36. As the first year of my theological education drew to a close, my classmates and I debated the wisdom of taking the question about the ordination of gays and lesbians to the floor of General Council that summer, 1988. Some argued we didn't have enough confidence that the vote would go in the direction of love, that we were risking everything by being reckless. They argued that the vote should be delayed until those who would undoubtedly vote against it could be persuaded of

the need to change their minds and envision a new future. We had parsed scripture passages that referred in any way to the issue, and published blank pamphlets proclaiming them to include everything Jesus had ever said about same sex love, which was, of course, nothing. Some weren't sure; others argued that love would win out, that we could have confidence in the conciliar model of our church where hearts could be changed and understandings morphed into something quite unexpected and freeing. We had shared openly and lovingly and some imagined that the wider church would have the same capacity to do so. Anxiety was the norm in those difficult days. We doubted our church; we doubted the authority of scripture; we doubted our leaders; we doubted the idea of god; we doubted salvation. We doubted. And that, it seemed, was what theological education could best teach us: to doubt and to do it boldly.

B. God

None of the particular elements of any cumulative tradition ... even the concept of 'god' ... can ever be final or absolute ... there is no religious belief which is absolute ... unchangeable ... which transcends the historical process in which it came to be enunciated ... for everyone, as a construction of the human mind, consequently reflects human finiteness. To affirm that any one belief, concept or word is absolute or unchangeable, transcending the historical process and human limitations, is to fall into the ancient error of idolatry.

Lloyd Geering, "The search for a 'World Theology' in a radically new age".

- *Journal for the Study of Religion*, vol. 1, no. 1 (March 1988), p. 332

37. God, a supreme, omnipresent, omniscient, benevolent, omnipowerful being who resides in and rules both the supernatural and natural realms and who has the ability to intervene in the latter, the theistic concept of God, did not survive my theological education. It had barely been present throughout, and dissolved, I believe, in my first introduction to the challenging but hope-filled images evoked by Teilhard de Chardin's limitless and ever evolving theology. I found those images merging with the challenges to traditional theologies and cosmologies presented by the then-

Catholic outlier Matthew Fox and his friend, the green theologian Brian Swimme, who invited me to see god in everything and in nothing and to watch its presence emerge and recede in every circumstance of my life. It was made real for me in the civil disobedience of the Berrigan brothers and the liberation theologians. I came to know god as something I could acknowledge or deny, as love I could show or withhold, and by doing so, either limit or enhance its presence in my life. My choices – everyday or once in a lifetime – created or destroyed the possibility of god. It took years for that idea to cohere into how I came to understand god, but the loss of God as presented by writers in a long ago and distant time was the direct result of my theological education and for that, I am forever grateful.

C. God, the Trinity

38. I am not able to extract what I learned about the Trinity during by theological training from what I learned afterward. These are, then, for the most part, the recollections of moments, not the content of lectures.

39. A church history class I vividly remember was set up as the Council of Nicaea featuring a debate on the Arian heresy. Half of the class argued that Jesus was not co-eternal with the Father and the other half argued that he was. A particularly creative classmate sang, to the tune of the theme song of Gilligan's Island, a full verse he had composed supporting Arius. The only words I recall are the first line, "There was a time when the son was not..."

40. I also recall preaching a sermon on it later during my internship at St. Margaret's United in Kingston. The male section of the choir there was predominantly composed of professors of mathematics at Queen's University. I recall one of them speaking with me after the sermon. He had not realized that the Bible was not the source of the doctrine. It had been created specifically to address a number of disagreements regarding the nature of God. In other words, as a doctrine,

it had been developed as a way to establish right belief, dogma, not to stimulate the mythic story to which I had chosen to merge my life.

D. God as Father

We today do not think in natural/supernatural categories. God is not for us a human parent figure ... that worldview has passed away.

- John Shelby Spong, *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism* (1991), p. 236

41. As noted above, feminist theology was coming to the fore during my time at Queen's Theological College, and we regularly had conversations, sometimes challenging ones, about the use of gender-exclusive language. The work of engaging congregations on this controversial topic had already commenced but the work of embedding feminist voices in the study of theology was still limited. Several years later, theological books by female theologians were still categorized and filed in the United Church Bookstore under Women's Issues. One day in class, after I had once again requested that a professor refrain from gender exclusive examples and language, that professor responded that his job was to prepare me for the pulpit and, just as it would be a waste of time for the Teacher's College to teach its students about the latest in projection technology if their future classrooms would have an overhead projector, it would be a waste of time to teach me to use gender inclusive language when churches continued to use traditionally masculine language. He sought me out and apologized to me later after returning from a sabbatical leave. This did raise, however, a critically important issue regarding the reality all theological college students studying for ministry must address at some point: the difference between the theology they are taught in college and the beliefs that were held, often tenaciously, by those in their future the pastoral charges.

42. We were taught to use a variety of methods to study the Bible and historical documents of the church: textual criticism, through which we sought to identify the earliest versions of biblical

texts (a surprise to those who arrived at College believing there was only one, perfect version of the Bible); historical criticism, which set writings in their particular historical and social contexts (another surprise when introduced to the argument that some “prophesies” had been written years, decades, or centuries after the event supposedly predicted); literary criticism, by which the genre of selected pieces were established in hopes of further insights about its origins; form criticism, which focused on pre-literate forms that existed within the text; and, redaction criticism, which essentially used a cut and paste method to compare different passages to determine how the complete whole had come together over time, what were the original sources and the editorial additions which held the continuities together.

43. All of these methods brought a critical perspective to textual interpretation and over all of them lay a hermeneutic of suspicion: our prejudices, what we wished to find in a gospel or text, had to be identified and thoroughly examined. Nothing was sacred or immune from examination and challenge. For those coming to the text looking for patriarchal privilege or anything else, this hermeneutic required that we prove the assumption before we could build upon it.

44. Many women had done much of that work before us and more were to come. Naomi Goldenberg's *The Changing of the Gods* argued that the theism of the Bible was so rife with misogyny that only a return to a concept as feminine as "the Goddess" could right the wrongs Christianity had wreaked. Phyllis Tribble refused to let go of the roots of our tradition, however, and in *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* dove deeply into ancient Jewish texts where she found what she argued were non-patriarchal images of the divine intimated in the recurrence of words related to the word "womb." Her *Texts of Terror* drove home the misogyny present in the Bible in passages often overlooked by lectionary committees and pastoral preachers. After reading her Phyllis Tribble's work, the world's most beloved book isn't one I would choose for bedtime reading.

Rosemary Radford Reuther leaned in to the denial of her right to the priesthood in the Roman Catholic Church of which she was a member and launched WomenChurch, a movement that laid out accessible, feminist liturgies used by and influential in many feminist circles and women's spirituality groups. Her *Faith and Fratricide* employed her skills to proclaim anti-Semitism a product of Christianity, sourcing it in the gospels to which we were devoting ourselves.

E. God as Son

45. Jesus, too, underwent significant changes in my understanding as my education continued. Although my family history contains early childhood engagements I described as being with Jesus, I have no personal memories of them. I can only take from stories my mother told me that I believed in his invisible presence as a child, but by the time I entered theological college, I had moved away from that understanding.

46. At Queen's, most of the focus on Jesus was drawn from the Gospels, with less attention on the rest of the New Testament. Dr. Robert Bate, a fellow of the Jesus Seminar, and Dr. Herb Bassler, a Jewish Rabbi, were the professors who led us on our explorations of the texts.

47. Northrop Frye, in an address to the Emmanuel College Alumni reunion in 1990, dipped into the conversation on literalism applied to the story of Jesus. Recognizing that there is no sense experience of the spiritual, Frye noted that the easy assumption that the stories of the gospels were "literally true" is, in fact, a linguistic fallacy. There can be no literal truth when the stories were written with the intention of creating reactions among a given people.

It would be absurd to see the New Testament as only a work of literature: it is all the more important, therefore, to realize that it is written in the language of literature, the language of myth and metaphor. The Gospels give us the life of Jesus in the form of myth: what they say is, 'This is what happens when the Messiah comes to the world.' One thing that happens when the Messiah comes to the world is that he is despised and rejected, and searching in the nooks and crannies of the gospel text for a credibly historical Jesus is merely one more

excuse for despising and rejecting him. Myth is neither historical nor anti-historical: it is counter-historical. Jesus is not presented as a historical figure, but as a figure who drops into history from another dimension of reality, and thereby shows what the limitations of the historical perspective are.

The gospel confronts us with all kinds of marvels and mysteries, so that one's initial reaction may very well be that what we are reading is fantastic and incredible. Biblical scholars have a distinction here ready to hand, the distinction between world history and sacred history ... Unfortunately, there is as yet almost no understanding of what sacred history is, so the usual procedure is to try to squeeze everything possible into ordinary history, with the bulges of the incredible that still stick out being smoothed away by a process called demythologizing. However, the Gospels are all myth and all bulge, and the operation does not work.

- Northrop Frye, *The Double Vision: Language and Meaning in Religion*, 1990. p. 16-17.

48. Frye's vision, rather than turning one entirely off the process of exploring the historicity of the gospels, encourages that exploration, if only to establish and confirm the impossibility of taking the text literally. We cannot enter the texts in the manner in which first and second century communities did. We can only enter them as twenty-first century explorers trying to get a glimpse of what it was that was so important. Frye continued.

I am not trying to deny or belittle the validity of a creedal, even a dogmatic, approach to Christianity: I am saying that the literal basis of faith in Christianity is a mythical and metaphorical basis, not one founded on historical facts or logical propositions. Once we accept an imaginative literalism, everything else falls into place: without that, creeds and dogmas quickly turn malignant. The literary language of the New Testament is not intended, like literature itself, simply to suspend judgment, but to convey and vision of spiritual life that continues to transform and expand our own. That is, its myths become, as purely literary myths cannot, myths to live by; its metaphors become, as purely literary metaphors cannot, metaphors to live in.

- Frye, p. 17-18

49. A text for the first-year introduction to church history course was Elaine Pagels' *The Gnostic Gospels*. Our professor, Dr. Marguerite Van Die, definitively knocked the canonical gospels off their perches and required that we consider them in light of the other gospels to which

we now have access as well as the very real likelihood that there were dozens of them in total. Exploring those that were not included in the New Testament was fascinating; they presented alternate images of the man we call Jesus, each, if we take Frye seriously, with its own mythic imprint, created to share one of the numerous and diverse messages the early evangelists were seeking to express.

50. The result of our study of the Jesus of the New Testament particularly as he was depicted in the gospels, including the exploration of the extracanonical gospels to which we were introduced, the peeling away of the accretions of translations steeped in the prejudices of their own time and place, and the use of the variety of hermeneutical tools placed in my hands by the knowledgeable, challenging, and encouraging professors of Queen's Theological College during my time there, was the belief that there was a mythic story being told through the various voices that told it and that its purpose was not only to supersede a mythic story that had become brittle, misinterpreted and dangerous, but to inspire a new understanding for a new time and a new world. I was inspired through my study to be open to new ways to live, exemplify, and tell that story through my own life, in my personal choices, in my relationships, and in the living of what would eventually be my legacy. I remain committed to that approach, to finding new ways, relevant for the contemporary community I serve, to relate that story in a way that is inspiring to them. Even if it means letting go of the story that initially inspired me.

F. God as Holy Spirit

51. How to express the presence of what I might have called the Holy Spirit while at Queen's - perhaps the closest thing to it was my complete infatuation with liturgy during my time there and following. I am sure there are those who would identify what was happening in our program and among the student body as the movement of the Holy Spirit.

52. The liturgical renewal movement was underway, as it had been since Vatican II, reaching into the protestant churches as a ripple effect from that great council. I understood the movement as an attempt to reinvigorate worship for a contemporary community that was increasingly indifferent to church. The United Church, as well as its sister Protestant denominations and the Roman Catholic Church, was engaged in seeking new ways to attract membership to counter its attendance losses.

53. There were three major streams of liturgical renewal happening at the time, and, in some ways, each of them was alive and well, to different degrees, in UCC congregations. A highly technical and upbeat service met the needs of the young and many congregations were offering services that met at different times of the week to cater to a clientele that demanded more of the church than centuries old liturgies and hymns. I don't think we were particularly successful with these. Less in evidence were charismatic gatherings, the function and outcome of which was left up to "the Spirit." The final one, at which the United Church excelled, was the development of highly ceremonial services.

54. When I began my studies, I had had a very limited exposure to anything out of the ordinary in a United Church. I had spent many Sunday mornings with friends at the local Anglican Cathedral, but mostly I had faithfully attended the equally predictable services of the church in which I had been raised. Mind you, we then had a much feistier minister than we'd had when I was a child, but the music, the readings, the rest of the service looked pretty much the same.

55. Theological college exposed me to drama, dance, the use of colours, and new music including music used exclusively for liturgical impact rather than for theological edification, all of it completely and utterly new to me. My background, which I had thought was pretty out there, proved to be as standard a menu as any other United Church might provide. I was entranced with

the new possibilities and took heartily to exploring creative ways to make worship more engaging, transformational, even. Professors who had taught us the basics, gave us free reign.

56. Within the parameters of the liturgy, which in the UCC was very fluid, we experimented with poetry, drama, diverse materials (many bringing elements of “creation” into worship setting), candles, responsive readings, versicles, litanies, and communion by intinction – something that had been introduced at my home church as a special thing that happened only during the magical service held on Christmas Eve. Most of it came in from more sacramental traditions but we were experimenting and weren’t concerned with where it came from. If it was effective, it was worthy. We were playing at alchemy; art, word, experiential elements, and hearts all brought together to cause an otherwise impossible transformation. These were important opportunities for us to dig into our own creativity and invite its expression.

57. To me, it was the invitation to the Spirit that resided in each of us to be freed and to free.

G. Understanding of Call

58. When preparing to enter Queen's Theological College, I went through the process toward ordination as it existed in the late 1980s. At one point, a minister inquired about my call. I said I didn't think that I had anything that another might recognize as a literal “call”, but that I felt deeply about entering the ministry despite my inability to locate an impetus for that conviction. He then shared with me a story of his call as he had shared it in his early days at theological college. One day when the students had gathered together, they had begun to tell stories about their calls. As the circle made its way to him, he realized that he had no story to tell; he, too, had lacked anything that suggested a supernatural intervention, conversation, or burning bush epiphany. When it came his turn, he made up a fantastic tale and felt spared the humiliation of having to tell them he'd experienced nothing other than the conviction that he was to become a minister. We shared the

belief that the idea of "call" was open to huge misunderstandings among candidates and questioned whether it was a good indicator of one's commitment or appropriateness for ministry, especially since he had found it could so easily be formed out of nothing other than a sense of surety.

59. Much of the conversation at Queen's that pertained to call revolved around our relationship to others and to the world and how those relationships would be lived out from the position of an ordained minister. We were introduced to the difference between a professional and confessional role and I found I moved with ease into use of the latter to explain my sense of call. It reflected the fundamental nature of the relationship I had to life itself, to the people in my life, to church, to my future role in that church. If I were able to serve and find ways to do so that nurtured my own self at the same time, then I would be living out what I considered my call to be.

60. While I was at Queen's studying theology, I did some work with a therapist to achieve clarity around what exactly it was I wanted to do with my studies. I clearly enjoyed the academic quest as it applied to biblical study; however, in my field placements and subsequently in my internship, I felt a deep affinity for pastoral ministry as well.

61. As a therapeutic project, I created a stole for my ordination based on a story I had shared with my therapists, written by Anne Spurgeon, "The Parable of the Naked Lady." In the story, women who serendipitously come together are moved by a catalyst – the naked lady – to reflect upon and address the realities of their lives and to realize that they were not only burdened by the truths of who they were, they were also deeply enriched by them. In therapy, I realized, with the help of Spurgeon's story, that whatever it was I did, I needed to be whole, aware of and in touch with as much of myself as possible, and that included being a woman, a lover, a mother, a business person, a woman of faith, a home-maker. My call had to be answered by all of me, not just the part who studied theology or attempted to practice spiritual disciplines. Call was about everything.

62. What call was *not* for me, was a communication or sign from a divine interventionist deity directing me to the path chosen for me and for which that deity had outfitted me. There were students at the College who reported extraordinary experiences from which they had deduced a “call to ministry”. I did not have an experience at all like that; my call emerged as a deep conviction that I was to use my gifts in a particular area.

H. Understanding of the Word

63. Our technical approach to the “Word” as scholars of the Bible is addressed above. At the beginning of a class on the Gospel of Mark, the professor, Rabbi Herb Basser, reminded us that, no matter what happened in the class, how completely we dissected the material before us, it was our responsibility, not his, to put it back together in a way that allowed us to continue to hold it as “scripture.” The book was not his holy text; but it was ours and he was readying us for the challenge it would be to see it in that manner after we had applied the tools of critical inquiry to it.

64. Rabbi Basser’s words have continued to inform my understanding of the responsibility I have toward my congregants when it comes to the exploration of the bible at times of study. I use the analogy of a window frame to share with them the same ideas the children of our Sunday Club explored using Plato’s cave. When we are within the frame that defines what it is we are studying, we are part of the subject. We see the object of our inquiry from the eyes of someone with a vested interest in the inquiry.

65. This is what the work of Christian theologians often is: the study of the texts, traditions, symbols, and rituals of Christianity by those who are deeply embedded in the tradition and invested in its health. They are also dependent upon it for the maintenance of their worldview. Rabbi Basser was reminding us that, as Christians training for lives of leadership in the church, we were invested in the outcome of our explorations. It wasn’t actually a reminder, however; it was a warning. Take

this apart too vigorously, he was saying, and the cost of putting it back together might be your intellectual integrity. For many, in many disciplines, not seeing what is directly in front of them and fully obvious to others, is the simple result of their not risking their health, their families, their livelihood, or their worldview. Compromise can act as a necessary shield.

66. On the other hand, when religion scholars with no vested interest in the subject of their inquiry explore what is inside the frame from outside of it, the potential risk to the individual is mitigated because they are not dependent upon the outcome of their inquiry for the maintenance of their worldview, their family, livelihood, or intellectual integrity. It was easy for Rabbi Basser to yank away at our “holy texts” – after all, they were Christian! And within his tradition, that yanking wasn’t forbidden. It was actually a requisite and ongoing component of remaining faithful by engaging the texts vigorously. Nothing in the Judaic tradition was ordained as absolutely and finally true; everything was up for debate, exploration, always waiting for the assault of the new generation’s most brilliant minds. Christianity had not maintained that engagement style; it had, by way of successions of creeds and other doctrinal statements, placed very clear boundaries around what constituted right belief and what did not.

I. Understanding of the Sacraments

67. The community at Queen’s Theological College worked together each week to engage in a weekly worship service which included communion. During the orientation retreat of my first year, I experienced my first inkling that, for some, there was more import given to the form of the sacraments than to the function when an upper year student refused to participate because the cups being used were plastic. His comment, “What will be next? Orange juice?”

68. The experience was perfectly balanced at the conclusion of my studies. As an intern at St. Margaret’s, I was not licensed to do the sacraments. If my supervisor, Doug Paterson, who was in

the final stages of kidney cancer, was unable to preside over them, I invited an ordained member of Presbytery to do so and, if possible, to do the whole service allowing me to take a Sunday off.

69. On one such occasion, I was not at the church when the individual responsible for setting up communion arrived, sat down in her pew, opened the bulletin and realized that she had utterly forgotten her duty for that morning. Caught unprepared, she went to the kitchen and, finding there some apple juice and left over matzo from an event which had taken place in the hall, set these out as the elements for the communion service.

70. When it came time to prepare and distribute the elements, the Presbyterian made no comment and served them as they had been presented to him. Congregants participated as though nothing was any different, some of them later remarking to me about the innovative elements which they thought I had chosen as a way of engaging them in a new, more intentionally aware manner.

71. Though the elements had been completely different than anyone had expected, the effect upon the congregation had been at least as, if not more, significant than usual. My upper year colleague had been only partially correct. Yes, we do wish to ensure proper decorum, but I came to recognize that the effect of what we call a sacrament takes place in an individual's heart and reflects how the persons themselves, not the elements have been prepared.

72. Our text for this topic was James F. White's *The Sacraments as God's Self-Giving*. White had a deeply sacramental view of Christianity and turned each sacrament toward the light in ways that challenged us to see them differently. He reflected sacramentally on all things related to communal worship and recommended that the church not limit itself to those sacraments identified in denominational doctrines, but to see many of the ways in which a believers' faith was practiced as an opportunity to "see" god's self-giving. It was that "self-giving" that most fascinated White.

73. White's engagement with the sacrament of baptism clearly brought to the fore the elements of the birth process as integral factors for interpreting baptism. We enter the world through the waters of the womb. We commit ourselves to the world through the waters of baptism. This was new to many of us, as our experiences had almost exclusively been of men baptizing babies without any allusion to the anatomy of the birth process.

J. Understanding of Pastoral Care

74. The study of pastoral care provided ample opportunity to explore tools and techniques adequate to the work of assisting individuals, families, and communities in addressing chronic or critical situations of concern. Field placements at the Ministry with the Deaf in Belleville and at St. Margaret's United Church, summer employment at the Kingston Psychiatric Hospital, and my internship at St. Margaret's provided opportunity to use those tools to engage, reflect, integrate learning and re-engage. I learned to deal with my introverted nature and to lean in to what is, in ministry, sometimes considered a weakness. My default position was to avoid engagement on intimate issues despite my facility with small talk and light conversation. Over the course of my internship, I addressed that concern directly.

75. The Reverend Svend Holm, the chaplain at Kingston Psychiatric Hospital and my direct supervisor, regularly provided feedback that initially alarmed but ultimately, and appropriately, reoriented me. Two summers working with him provided me insights I could not have achieved elsewhere. For example, having watched me interact with psychiatric patients and stumble my way through conversations in which I attempted to make sense of what was being said and respond consistently with the often insubstantial thread of the conversation, Rev. Holm reminded me that everyone in the room knew they were in the room because of issues of mental illness and I needed to stop pretending that the illness didn't exist. That was hugely significant for me.

76. I also recall the work of processing some admissions one summer, each of them a woman who had been admitted by her husband. Upon engaging with each woman, a responsibility of mine following an admission, I learned that each had taken assertiveness training classes within weeks of her admission (I have no idea if it was the same class – they were not there at the same time). That information lives within me.

77. On another occasion, I was locked in a room with a new admission, a young, manic male who was loud, aggressive, and angry. The potential for violence was high. I had watched Rev. Holm, who was a very slight man, step into such situations regularly. His attention was always on the individual, not the behaviour being exhibited. It required a level of detachment and engagement I was not certain I would be able to attain. But after what seemed like an eternity, a period that was likely less than fifteen minutes, when a staff person arrived to ask if I was okay, I was able to affirm that I was and ask to be left there with the still-raging man. My willingness to remain contributed to a trust that was established between us and Rev. Holm's intervention as the pastoral contact was not required throughout the patient's hospitalization.

K. Exercise of Ministry in Continuity with the Faith of the Church

The system is not working. That is how a paradigm shift begins: the established way of seeing the world no longer functions. *Matthew Fox*

78. Early in the history of our union, The United Church was already identifying itself as distinct from its past. At the same time, it was its fervent wish to remain faithful to that past in a way that presented the distinguishing marks of the faith's central message in a relevant contemporary way.

Christianity, from the day of Pentecost to this day, has been a continuous experience of God's saving work in Christ. Through this experience, the Christian Church came into being; and by this experience it has continued to exist. There has been an evangelical succession throughout the ages, leading onward from the

Apostles to our own day and generation. We are the heirs of that great spiritual heritage, to which our predecessors, in their knowledge of Christ, have made by their faith and life, continuous and increasing contribution.

- T. B. Kilpatrick, *Our Common Faith*. (UCPH: Toronto, 1928) p. 66-67

79. The changes the United Church has instituted over the course of its history have been planned and embraced in the tradition of reiterating the core of the Christian faith for a contemporary world. That is what happened at Nicaea and afterward as the doctrine of the Trinity cohered, solidified, and became immutable. That is what happened when the newly excommunicated reformers set down their beliefs and codified their aims during the Protestant Reformation. That is what happened when Methodists, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists came together to create a united Protestant presence in Canada in the early days of the twentieth century.

80. Even so, T. B. Kilpatrick, in *Our Common Faith*, written shortly after union, felt the need to remind us why we needed new doctrinal statements, warning of the insincerity of adopting those set out for previous generations.

How is The United Church related to the Creeds, which the Church has drawn up from time to time, and which have been the means, whereby the Church has made plain to itself its faith in Christ, and has made confession of that faith before man? It would not be a fair answer to that question, for a modern church simply to repeat the language of the creeds, or even to adopt one of them as its own.

Such action would not be intelligent, and could scarcely be sincere. A church which claims to stand to that substance of the faith, which is the abiding essence of Christianity, and which found expression, age after age, in the great creeds of the universal church. This loyalty, moreover, must not be a mere lip service. The church must be prepared, when need arises, to give utterance to its faith, in the language and the forms of present-day experience and reflection, and to show that, in these, it has conserved all that is vital and permanent in the creeds of the past.

- Kilpatrick, p. 67-68

81. Our classroom examinations of the Articles of Faith of the Basis of Union often brought about incredulity and loud guffaws. Much later, during the General Council's work on developing a new statement of faith, when I introduced the Articles to the congregation at West Hill and others, I discovered that few were aware of them at all. When they do read them, they are often aghast at the exclusive language, archaic concepts, and seemingly pre-enlightenment understandings of the world our existing statements seemed to uphold and promote.

82. We all knew we were going to have to be determined to be in "essential agreement" but, based on everything we had learned in our time at seminary from teachers and texts, we did not expect conference Interview Boards or Education and Students' Committees to take literal approaches to the Articles of Faith. We understood that if we were granted a United Church Testamur, it would be because we had successfully completed the requirements for study in the United Church of Canada, and we assumed that understanding the place of the Articles of Faith in the contemporary church was included in those requirements. We knew that the Conference Education & Students Committee (subsequently combined with the Interview Board to become the Conference Interview Committee) would discern our essential agreement and recommend ordination only if they were convinced by our interviews and written applications that our beliefs constituted what the Conference determined essential agreement to be. (Note: this could be entirely different in one conference than in another, of course.) The College had done its work; in examining and approving its candidates for ordination, each Conference was affirming or denying the program of instruction provided by the theological college. If a college was prepared to provide a Testamur but a Conference was unwilling to ordain, the reasons to deny ordination would most likely go to other areas of suitability, not essential agreement. The completion of the course of study provided by the College would have already established essential agreement.

Part IV: Ministry and Continuing Education

83. West Hill is a congregation that has continually engaged in open dialogue, whether its clergy at the time have been theologically more conservative or more liberally inclined. Of great importance has been to keep in close touch with the wider culture in which we all live, and identify what about the way we communicate might act as barriers to participation to those outside the church. Each time barriers have been identified, West Hill has worked hard to eliminate them.

84. In the mid-1980s, the Rev. Tom Gilchrist led the congregation through a physical renovation which removed physical barriers to participation. (And, thankfully, the brick wall which obscured the choir when they sat down!) An installation of exterior ramps and an elevator made the mid-century building accessible at a time when many other congregations were unable to do so.

85. In the mid-1990s, the Rev. Bruce Sanguin encouraged and supported the congregation in removing of barriers caused by gender-exclusive language. At the end of the work undertaken by the Worship Committee and shared with and approved by the congregation, the responses to the reading of scripture had evolved from “This is the word of the Lord” to “This is the witness of God’s people: Thanks be to God.” At the same time, the Lord’s Prayer was amended to begin with the phrase “Our loving God”.

86. In 2001, we began addressing the barrier to participation the use of theistic language in all the elements of the service was for the many in the congregation and beyond who did not hold a belief in god as a supreme being who lived in heaven, intervened in human affairs, and would rule the earth. We began the work of removing that barrier by focusing on the values we wished to live out in our community and in our personal lives. Those values, which were supported by our Christian heritage, were congruent with the values shared by all people of goodwill and have been

the basis for our work over the past fifteen years. They provided not a barrier, but a bridge, a bridge that many have used to re-enter the church, or enter it for the first time in their lives.

87. In 2012, having recognized that the traditional Sunday morning church service type gatherings are another barrier to participation, the congregation, working with a consultant, created a program designed to ensure that the key elements it had identified as sacred to human community would be shared broadly and handed to subsequent generations. We envisioned the program as a template that could be recreated in any setting using the resources of the wider community in which it was being implemented. The barrier we met in this area was solely our own financial constraints, and we were deeply disappointed when the Presbyteries of Toronto Conference Corporation declined our request for grant money to develop this template project as they considered it to be the development of a secular organization.

88. This excerpt from *Amen* (2011) chronicles a two-year undertaking which took place between fall 1999 and spring 2001 and gives context to the work done at West Hill United Church over the past fifteen years. It recounts the work that serendipitously became the catalyst for our work on the language we use. Following a time of difficulty in the life of the court, a program was devised to help build stronger relationships between the Presbytery, which I was serving as Chair, and congregations. The program material used was from *Discovering Mission*, published by the Division of Mission in Canada. (I have previously confused this program with the *Embracing Transformation* program which was published at about the same time.) As you will see, the result of visiting almost every congregation in the Toronto South presbytery (there were twenty-three at

that time, I believe), was the recognition of the barrier noted above, the barrier to understanding created by the use of theistic language throughout a typical Sunday morning service.³

Several years ago, I helped lead a program that, over the course of two years, engaged members of my denomination in congregational workshops about core values and core beliefs. I can credit that program for much of the work in which I've subsequently been involved. Some of the workshops sought to get at the beliefs individuals hold. Which core beliefs (conscious or not) buried within their Christian tradition informed their choices and their ideas about what was sacred? Out of the process, my co-facilitator and I came to recognize a huge discrepancy between what we, as theologically trained church leaders, understood about Christianity, and what those we engaged in conversations seemed to understand. In uncanny numbers, unless participants had some theological training or had spent time working closely with others who did, they had what I would call an "elementary" understanding of Christianity.

...

What my colleague and I noted during our core beliefs program was that although we, as clergy, believed we were passing contemporary scholarship on to our congregations, people, for some reason, weren't picking up on it. Despite the theologically liberal or even progressive non-theistic perspective of many clergy, Christianity in the minds and hearts of most churchgoers remains the Christianity of their Sunday school classes. With no information to shift their understanding—private conversations with clergy, continuing education, or an exposure to contemporary scholarship on Christianity—most believe what they've always believed. God lives in heaven. He sent Jesus to live on earth. While on earth, Jesus, who is really God, was also really human. Some believe that he died for "our sins," others that he was put to death because he fought for justice. Sin is described in vague, Ten Commandment-type references, rather than in relation to our complicity in the world's ills. If we go to heaven, we will be with God, Jesus, and all the relatives we have loved. If we don't ... well, we don't generally talk about that, preferring instead a bit of fuzziness around the doctrines of hell and the "finally impenitent." And all of this is somewhere in the Bible—the Holy Bible, the word of God, God's word to us, TAWOGFAT (The Authoritative Word of God for All Time)—which is known to be an old book and so is believed to be the best book, or at least a very good one. What I learned over the course of those two years was that clergy, although trained in critical scholarship and fully cognizant of the human construction of the Bible, simply weren't getting the message across. The people in the pews in front of us didn't know what we knew, even though we thought we'd been telling them for years. What was that all about?

³ Note: In order to enable electronic insertion of text from my published works, excerpts are from unedited manuscripts which may or may not be identical to the final publication.

I returned to my congregation determined to figure out what was blocking my message from getting to the people I so wanted to reach. It didn't take long to figure it out. In fact, I started my next Sunday with it: the opening prayer. Well, the opening prayer and pretty much everything that followed it.

You see, the whole Sunday morning thing continues to unfold according to a traditional theological paradigm, an old core narrative. The readings, the prayers, the hymns, the wording on the offering envelopes, the person in the fancy clothes up front assumed to be the only one in the room with special access to God. It didn't matter what I believed or what I was saying, as long as everything else reinforced that old, old story—that God in heaven, who is holy, almighty, all-knowing, and everywhere, is going to keep us safe, somehow, now and in the end. Because God is. God does. God helps. God cares. God loves. God blesses. God saves. God punishes (yes, we need to include this). God guides. God answers. God promises. It's God we pray to and God that responds. This is the story of elementary Christianity, and it comes from the Bible (although it's nestled in there among less flattering descriptions of God and God's activities). However, close all that comes, or doesn't come, to your understanding of god, it perfectly matches much of the language in the prayers and hymns and biblical readings used in the average church. And long after people forget a minister's message, or even the minister herself, they still remember the Lord's Prayer, the favourite old hymns, and the memorized Psalm or Bible verse. When I realized that—and it was a watershed moment for me—nothing was the same. It couldn't be.

A. God

89. I often find it helpful for people to complete the following sentence in order for me to get an idea of what it is they are speaking about when they refer to God. “When I use the word ‘god’, I mean ...” As well, when speaking with groups across Canada and the U.S., and overseas, or connect on social media or email, and I'm asked what I believe, I am eager to share the concept of god that began in my early church settings, developed for and by me during my theological education and which I have continued to develop through my reading, continuing education, sharing with colleagues and congregants, and my practice of ministry. I had written it out for a member of our congregation some weeks ago who then shared it at a meeting of the congregation with the Congregational Health Team of Toronto Southeast Presbytery in May, 2016. I understand it was also shared with members of Toronto's Annual Meeting of Conference in Midland.

When I use the word "god", I mean that which we create between us that is beautiful, worthy of us, and that raises up and honours our human dignity. When we create those kinds of relationships - with ourselves, others, the world around us, the stuff we interact with - we "create god" in the world. And what we create empowers and strengthens us, gives us courage in the face of challenges, offers us solace in times of sorrow and hurt, and convicts us when we fall beneath our own standards. It has a powerful impact on us. But we are its creators; it did not create us and, indeed, cannot survive without us.

And, of course, we can create the opposite, too, by using one another for our own ends, not respecting and cherishing what we own, not honouring the beauty of who we are, ourselves. That has the opposite impact and drains our resources, our energy, our world. In a way, you could call that evil and it, too, has great power.

90. When I look back on the time in my ministry when I used the word "god" regularly, even though I was using it in a non-theistic sense, I am able to fit my present understanding comfortably back into most of the ways in which it was used by me and continues to be used by the church. What happened was simply that I came to see I had been largely unaware of how misleading things could be. Though I would be speaking of God in a non-theistic sense, many heard me talking of a personal all-loving, all-wise God who intervened in human lives. It is not that I decided I wanted to disabuse them of that view, much less evangelize other churches towards non-theism. I simply wanted to be clear about what I meant, about the concept that I hold myself accountable for. Although in my description above there is acknowledgment of agency, it is not an agency that is independent of us. The god we create by loving one another cannot reach out and hold me or direct me to look in a certain direction for what I need; it cannot answer my prayers or requests, nor can it heal me. It can't even find my keys for me. It does not exist until we bring it into being and exists solely because we do, in the same sense that love exists as a word whether we practice it or not, but only comes to life when we live it. I therefore do not want to be interpreted by others as espousing a concept of God as an independent agency, or I am inadvertently promising and assuring them of certain outcomes for which I cannot be accountable. But when I do call upon the above concept of god, whether or not I use the word, when I bring it to the forefront of my mind

and heart, it most certainly encourages and strengthens me as I interact in the world. It is behind my choices; it is in my holistic make-up. I hold myself accountable for living that way, and in the same sense of integrity, can be held accountable for representing god that way. Over and over, people share that this sense of god works for them in their personal and community lives, inspiring, challenging, and transforming them in their relationships in ways that a concept of an external god, god as a being, did not do. A reading at West Hill one Sunday from Terry Pratchett describes the continuity of this presence in our lives.

Once we were blobs in the sea, and then fishes, and then lizards and rats and then monkeys, and hundreds of things in between. This hand was once a fin, this hand once had claws! In my human mouth I have the pointy teeth of a wolf and the chisel teeth of a rabbit and the grinding teeth of a cow! Our blood is as salty as the sea we used to live in! When we're frightened, the hair on our skin stands up, just like it did when we had fur. We are history! Everything we've ever been on the way to becoming us, we still are. [...]

I'm made up of the memories of my parents and my grandparents, all my ancestors. They're in the way I look, in the colour of my hair. And I'm made up of everyone I've ever met who's changed the way I think.

- *A Hat Full of Sky*

91. Our role in life, given Pratchett's image, is to make beautiful history in the lives of those we meet, love, know. And to weave the image into my own, it is to create the imprint of god on every relationship we have, making history in the lives of others.

92. We have many theories as to how the concept of god came into being and many more about the nature of its impact on human community. In the twenty-first century, I would hope that we would choose to embark upon the collation of those theories and come to an aggregate of information. We have the capacity to do that in the same way that E. O. Wilson is seeking to collate all the material known about life. Some authors have added greatly to that project: two most accessible to lay readers are Karen Armstrong, *A History of God*; Jack Miles, *God: A Biography*,

and dozens more books, theses, and articles that touch on the subject or explore it in depth have been written for more academic readers.

93. We also have the potential to gather a vast library of material related to the development of the concept of god and its characteristics, much of which will have been prepared for theological conversation and education within the church. The opening words of *A Song of Faith* seek to describe a god we cannot know.

God is Holy Mystery,
beyond complete knowledge,
above perfect description.

94. Because we have constructed our concepts of God and have so much information, accumulating in various disciplines – history, anthropology, archeology, psychology, neurology, sociology, etc., the word “Mystery” seems inaccurate if not misleading. For me, the word has been used too frequently to silence those reasonable questions for which we do not have comfortable answers. When we use it, we avoid dialogue, often refusing it entirely; we take our understandings and keep them to ourselves while closing our minds to the questions of others and the potential truths inherent in the exploration of them. When human beings have developed a concept of god that is difficult to comprehend, that contains obviously contradictory claims, claims and guarantees that are not realized in ordinary human life and that cannot adequately “explain” horrific suffering and violence, I would much rather adjust our concept of god than explain our lack of understanding (of our own created concept) by suggesting that of course it makes sense that we can’t fully understand, because god is by definition (our created definition) greater than our understanding, and is therefore known as Mystery, complete with capital letter. It would seem much more fruitful to seek to understand what we don’t yet know about the way the natural world works and the

human causes of suffering and violence in order to bring to them more effectively what we do understand about the value of justice and compassion.

95. The definition of panentheism used recently in a survey devised by the Reverend Richard Bott has the same effect on lay theological explorers: “The belief or doctrine that God is greater than the universe and includes and interpenetrates it.” Essentially what that means is that, since the universe itself is beyond our understanding, we cannot possibly comprehend something that, at the same time includes it, is greater than it, and that interpenetrates it.

96. The purpose of language is to communicate; when it is obscure – whether intentionally or otherwise – understanding is compromised. We are left with the idea that something is a mystery, beyond the limitations of our own minds even though we are the creators of that mystery. Indeed, the Rev. Bott’s use of the term ‘theist’ to include those who are panentheistic believers leads to confusion since the two terms, theist and panentheist, are usually mutually exclusive.

In theism, God is taken to be the name of the supernatural personal being believed to have created the world and to continue to have oversight (providence) of its affairs, intervening in them from time to time with miraculous events. - Geering, *Christianity without God*, 2002, p. 54]

[T]heism is the belief in the existence of deities. In popular parlance, the term theism often describes the classical conception of god(s) that is found in the monotheistic and polytheistic religions. – Wikipedia

Panentheism is the belief that the divine interpenetrates every part of the universe and extends, timelessly (and, presumably, spacelessly) beyond it. - Wikipedia

97. This cannot be construed to be “the classical conception of god(s).” Clearly, there is a disconnect between beliefs that can be *generally* understood to describe theism and those used by the Rev. Bott to draw conclusions from his survey results. An unbiased reader of those results, using Wikipedia definitions, would conclude that only one-third of the active clergy in the UCC,

by their own survey responses, are theists, a conclusion that is the direct opposite of the one published by the Rev. Bott.

98. Given the collected knowledge of the twenty-first century, while there is much we cannot know, there is also much we do know. Considerable amounts of what we do know undermine doctrinal statements relating to god. Retreating to the obliqueness of the word “Mystery” pretends that our ever-increasing stores of knowledge and wisdom have nothing to do with doctrine. If that is, indeed, the purpose for the use of the word “Mystery” then it adequately achieves it.

99. I do not find the word “Mystery” useful when it is attached to the concept of god. Many authors whose works I highly respect and through whose work I have learned much, revert to the use of the word “Mystery” when their claims seem to hit the wall of intellectual inquiry. Like the cartoon which depicts a professor pointing to a gap in a lengthy calculation and ask the student what happened in the gap, the likely answer is “a leap of faith,” not an abbreviation of further logical calculations. “Mystery” often shrouds a claim that is otherwise unsupportable giving it the veneer, within theological settings but none other, of respectability. In other disciplines, it would not be admissible as any sort of proof.

100. I feel similarly about the use of capital letters which suggest that the words are extraordinary and require a level of reverence from those encountering them. The Hebraic concept of placing a fence around something in order to protect it from violation seems to be apt here. Both the word “Mystery” and the capitalization of “Holy Mystery” creates a fence beyond which we are reluctant to proceed despite the reality that these issues must be engaged and engaged fully. The intimation, and an unfortunate one, is that we are protecting the concept from that engagement.

101. As to god being beyond our knowledge, of course, there is much in our world that is. As noted above, we are only beginning to explore the universe, encumbered as we are by our limited

human faculties. We can't even be sure of the number of dimensions encompassed within it or the potentially unlimited fields of inquiry that would need to be explored. Much may never be known.

102. We come to know things through our experience, interaction, and through information shared with us about them. All relationship is experiential and we have knowledge that is built up within us based on those relationships. Much of our knowledge comes to us through our lived experience. But we can never have experiential knowledge that is not mediated through our lives, the pre-existing perspectives that are the accumulation of our history. All experience is translated by the history of the individual even as that individual is having the experience. Two people witnessing the same event will have different experiences of it. So, yes, any experience of relationship is beyond complete knowledge. The imprint of love that we place upon another through relationship is transformed by the perspective, history, experience of the individual; it may or may not be received as the same thing that we offered because it is mitigated through that individual's life history both with us and beyond us.

103. The phrase "beyond complete knowledge" does not distinguish god in any particular way. It may, however, further remove from the inquirer any hope of ever engaging the concept of god to any level of satisfaction. Perhaps it staves up the fence noted above.

104. As for god being above perfect description, it requires effort to imagine that anything other than mathematics allows perfect description. Most of our knowledge of the world around us is built on a tacit understanding that we agree upon what it is we're talking about despite the fact that we are almost always talking about things for which we do not share an understanding. It takes ongoing description to come to agreements about even tangible objects. From *With or Without God*:

As with all words, 'toolbox,' too, resides in the ear of the beholder. We all have different memories and experiences that will bring the image to mind when the

word is heard. Perhaps you have an image of an uncovered wooden box, the handle, greased and worn with age, rising above two large, solid pockets on either side. Or maybe a once-bright red metal box, the lock bent and never-used, the paint chipped and dulled. Maybe it's a brilliant yellow plastic box, with handy snap-lidded compartments built into the top, caring neither whether they store or spill your carefully sorted bits and pieces. Yours might be an old treasured one handed down to you from a previous generation of fix-it-uppers or one as new as your own dreams of proficiency.

105. Against such complications, trying to arrive at a perfect description of a concept using a simple toolbox becomes daunting. The word “perfect” has the capacity to incite both awe and frustration; awe stimulated by the recognition that we are limited in our interaction with the world around us by our senses and the knowledge we can accrue and interpret through them; frustration nurtured by exactly the same reality: we are limited in what we can know.

106. Again, I find this statement unhelpful in the attempt to ascertain any truth or clarity about the concept of god, and find myself wondering, again, if its use is to make clear or merely obfuscate.

107. A Song continues:

Yet,
in love,
the one eternal God seeks relationship.

108. My concept of god is embedded in the idea of relationship, influenced greatly by the work of Martin Buber. So it is this statement – “... in love, the one eternal God seeks relationship” – that one would expect to be most closely aligned with my beliefs. But it is not. I do not believe, as noted above, that relationships have agency independent of those engaged in them. Yes, the relationship I have with a neighbour may wound or delight me or may provide me strength; however, without my neighbour's engagement or my own interaction with the neighbour or the relationship we have between us, it is impotent. Living beings are able to seek relationship but concepts are not; they do not have the power to act outside of the living beings that animate them

and respond to them. I do not believe in the supernatural inbreaking of a being into the natural order to affect me or any natural state of affairs. I do not believe that anything called ‘God’ has the capacity to seek relationship with me.

109. A Song continues:

So God creates the universe
and with it the possibility of being and relating.

110. I embrace the theory of evolution insofar as I can understand it. I do not know how the universe came into being; in that I am necessarily agnostic. I do not attribute what I do not know or understand to supernatural beings, forces, or events choosing against them in my expectation of contributing causes. There is much we do not know. I prefer, however, to assume that, should we come to understand fully, what we learn will have coordinates in the natural realm, not the supernatural. The emergence of the universe, I can only assume, lies within those same coordinates.

111. In my funeral service materials, I speak about what makes it possible for us to be and to relate to one another. We have no being or relating if we do not have life; we cannot simply claim, poetically or otherwise, that we have our being and our ability to relate because the god called God exists and makes it possible. Finding a common language to speak about our ability to be and relate bridges the gap between those who believe that we are here as the result of a divine plan and those who believe we are here as the result of chance and the emergence of a universe that set that chance into play.

112. In the memorial, funeral, and celebration of life services that I lead, I use this common language and intentionally move away from language that suggests that we “live, and move, and have our being” as the result of a divine, theistic god.

Our bodies hold the holiness that we are.
 We use them to give and receive love,
 to hold, create and carry life.
 We learn through them,
 move through the world in them,
 use them to interact with it and know it.
 Without our bodies,
 we would not be able to know and care for each other,
 to celebrate or see beauty,
 to listen to and love music and the voices of those who care for us. Our bodies are
 our lives.
 How vulnerable we are,
 - mere breath borne in such fragile vessels.
 Life as we know it has come to an end for _____,
 the breath no longer captured within,
 but set free from its confines.
 Believing boldly as we do,
 that love lives beyond the length of our days,
 we bravely commit his/her breathless body to be burned/buried,
 confident that s/he lives on in each of us.
 Free of the confines of his/her body,
 s/he is carried now in our dreams
 and so moves beyond the boundaries of the stars.
 As life has been breathed into each of us,
 so, in a breath we are gone.
 Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

113. The following is an excerpt from my 2008 publication *With or Without God: Why the Way We Live is More Important than What We Believe*.

God: A Human Concept

Once our idea of the Bible shifts away from its being TAWOGFAT (The Authoritative Word of God for All Time), everything in it is up for grabs. Everything. That means just what it says. Everything. It's not that there aren't good stories, dramas we can use metaphorically to challenge ourselves and set us back on the right path. It's that we can't say that anything those stories say or imply is factually true. It *may* be, but all we can really say about it is just that; it may be. There are no definitive answers.

It leaves us with a very big question, then. Just who or what is God?

The Bible actually presents a whole bunch of different pictures, images and understandings of God although almost all are masculine images. That's no surprise since most of it was written before they even bothered to count women in their census numbers. In the creation story, we're presented with a somewhat

bumbling God. The first thing we learn about him is that he tires easily. After uttering a sentence or two a day for six days, he needs to take a whole day off. He's not very insightful, creating a man in need of a companion and traipsing the entire animal population before the poor, lonely guy in the hopes that he'll find one attractive enough to mate with. After some time, and, no doubt, a great deal of frustration on Adam's part, God gets the picture and creates a woman. (Of course, you'll note that creation took place from the least evolved thing to the most evolved thing and that women were last. Think about it.) We learn that God is passive-aggressive, placing a tree in the garden that has delicious fruit on it and telling them not to eat it, behaviour fitting a kindergarten child. We learn, too, that he is not all-knowing as we thought, losing track of Adam and Eve shortly after creating them and wandering the garden calling for them. And then, of course, we learn that he is a bully, forcing them to leave paradise because they fell for his little temptation scheme.

We travel through the early books of the Bible with a God that seems to try to work things out for us by swooping in to extract us from the very hot water into which he dunked us in the first place.

We get the sense of God as this beneficent being who will always try to work things out until, as too often still happens, something goes seriously wrong and the idea of God has to be rethought. For the Israelites, it was the whole exile into Babylon, something that was definitely not supposed to happen to the people who were God's gift to the earth. Their captivity in Babylon also separated them from God who, at that time, was living in Jerusalem but a single good Ezekiel vision and God was mobile, complete with wings and wheels, and able to join them there. In order to handle the reality that God had seemingly forsaken them for those seventy some odd years, shaming them with defeat in front of the whole world, their new idea of God included the concept of judgment, since finding fault with their behaviour was not a difficulty and could, then, be logically proven to be the cause of their humiliation. That part of the idea of God rapidly took over and has remained, pretty much, the basic understanding until now. (Excepting a little blip during which Jesus seemed to be suggesting that God, or the Kingdom of Heaven, was in how we treated one another. His picture was inconsistent, though, because, so the story goes, he also sent people who didn't believe him straight to hell, so who really knows?)

Thinking freely

Why slog through all these inconsistent stories about God when I've just finished trying to convince you that the Bible isn't the authoritative word of God for all time, anyway? It is because I want you to think for yourself when you approach it and not fall back on preconceived notions. There will be things within it that resonate with you. Keep them, ponder them, and set the rest aside. Create new concepts of God for yourself or reject them altogether.

The people who wrote the Bible believed they had permission. They made up all kinds of different ways to see God. In a single psalm you will often find two or maybe three seemingly contradictory ideas about God. My favourite is Psalm 139. It gives us an image of this loving God that is present to us no matter where we are, “If I were to dwell in the outermost parts of the sea, there you would be also,” and then, before the reader gets too carried away by the images of being blissfully held in this eternal presence, the psalmist calls upon the warrior God to kill all the enemies known to his people. A loving God, an omnipresent God, a murdering God. All in one lyric poem. So, like the psalmist and other biblical writers of ancient days, print your own permission ticket and head outside the box.

Permission is hereby granted to the bearer of this ticket to explore
the concepts of God, Jesus, the Bible, and life in general;
(check one) ☐ beyond ☐ far beyond
former rigidly-guarded boundaries.

Signed, the bearer

It is impossible for us to know anything about what it is we call God beyond our personal experience might be and we are only able to interpret that experience through experiences we have or ideas with which we are already familiar. In other words, say you’ve had an experience that you believed was God. Perhaps you heard words coming to you in a time of deep need and confusion. You attribute them to God. Many people would. But you must already have had an idea of God as a being that could speak to you in order to interpret what you heard in that manner. If you had previously only been exposed to the concept of God as light, for instance, it would never have occurred to you that it was God talking because light does not speak. You’d have decided that it was your Great Aunt Hattie speaking to you either from her ocean faring ‘round the world trip or from the other side of the great abyss or maybe just your conscience giving you a much needed drop-kick into a new perspective. And even then, of course, only if those ideas had some previous idea placed in your brain in a manner with which your experience could resonate.

...

In order to explore the concept of God, we need to open ourselves to all kinds of possibilities, like God being light, or there being no God, for a couple of interesting examples. We need to take note of the ways we have been conditioned to experience God and then, when we’re having some sort of spiritual experience, be wary of the easy explanations. Step beyond the easy fit into the possibility of something other than what you might have previously thought.

Not so freely

In the past, any human experience that might have been claimed as spiritual has been held up to the light of the church's doctrines on God and the Spirit and declared holy or otherwise. The church, as the keeper of "Who God Is," has used its authority to validate or deny any experience that we've thought might be holy. A weeping statue and a few miraculous healings? Stamped with the church's approval. Sexual orgasm, thought by many to be the ultimate in spiritual experience? Absolutely not.

It is time for the church to give up that truth-testing role. Those in leadership positions in the church are fully aware that whatever god is, it is not described by the church's doctrines. They are even aware that there may be no such thing as god. Since the leadership of the church is unlikely to discard the pile of doctrines they have created and protected throughout its history, perhaps it would be best if they were to shift the focus of their protection. Perhaps, instead of preventing access so that those doctrines could not be tampered with, church leaders should prevent access to them in order to force us to explore and name for ourselves that from which we might glean spiritual insight. Perhaps "the people" have been too timid. Perhaps it is time to explore beyond the safety and security of the answers wrapped in ecclesial favour.

Should the church have the wherewithal to do that, the first easy answer that you wouldn't be able to access anymore is the idea that god is a being. Gone. Sit with that one for a minute. When you think about it, you may find that you haven't really been thinking about god theistically--as a distinct, other being, separate and definable—for a while. ... You may think of god as a remote being some of the time, but you also may have often thought of god as a feeling that makes you want to be the best person you can be (and I don't mean getting your name in Fortune 500.) You get that feeling when you plunk a quarter into a stranger's parking meter and don't leave a self-addressed stamped envelope for a thank you card to be sent. You get that feeling when you talk to your kids about trying to make the world a better place and they tell you some pretty great ideas they've come up with all on their own. You get that feeling when you stop and talk to that other wheelchair bound person who has been sitting all alone the whole time you've been visiting with your mom in rehab. All he does is smile at you and nod but that feeling is almost tangible. You get that feeling when you pick up the package you were expecting from the mail depot and in it you find that perfect gift you ordered for your child, or your lover, or yourself. Invite yourself to think of that feeling as god.

A worthy heritage

So the idea of God not being a being isn't that crazy after all. Indeed, Lloyd Geering, New Zealand theologian and author of *Christianity without God*, explores the development of the concept of a theistic god, by which I mean a god with "being"-ness, one able to act independently of us, and finds the roots of non-theism deep within the Christian tradition and the philosophical arguments it has historically rejected. In a mere 146 pages, Geering answers a whole host of

arguments that might be made against a non-theistic understanding of God and challenges us to finally recognize that in its current doctrinal incarnation, the church can only be doomed.

Finding traces of non-theism already in existence in early Judaism, Geering steers his way through the development of the Christian scriptures, early doctrine, and subsequent theology and philosophy to arrive at his point—that non-theism not only grows out of the Christian tradition but is the only logical next step for the church to take. Along the way, he points out several remarkable insights or assimilations that should have tolled theism’s death knell long ago.

Hebraic understandings of God developed in the same tribal mythology as did those of other faiths. During the first Axial age, when those understandings were being challenged and significantly changed, within Judaism polytheism gave way to monotheism, a belief in one God who, initially, ruled over the other gods but then came to denounce the existence of any gods other than himself. Through the course of that shift, it became increasingly obvious that no one person or tribe could conclusively describe God. The understanding of God as being beyond description came to be the norm. Indeed, following that period, any attempts to describe God were considered blasphemous. It was as if in order to coalesce many gods into one, the description of the one had to incorporate all the characteristics of the many. Such a comprehensive god, of necessity, came to be beyond description.

As Christianity developed amongst those who claimed Jewish heritage, this comprehensive God was further refined by new arguments to which it was exposed. The platonic concepts of a remote, impersonal god, *theos*, stretched the understanding of the Israelites who understood a very personal God as having mucked about in history with them, exhibiting all too human characteristics. Complicating this relationship was the Stoic concept of *theos* as the principle of rationality and order upon which the whole of the universe was set. Early Christianity grew out of a delicate interweaving of these and many other different experiences and understandings.

In fact, Geering argues that the doctrine of the Holy Trinity was just such a feat. Unable to reconcile the complex perspectives of those for whom the Christian community had become deeply meaningful, it was not inappropriate to simply express all of them and perhaps all at once. Geering points to Paul’s early benediction, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit,” as a straightforward inclusion of such a variety of experience claiming that each of the three separate natures appealed to a significant experience being grafted into this one, new concept; through the apostles was mediated a rich experience of the grace bestowed upon them by Jesus; from its Jewish roots came a deep experience of God’s love; and within early Christian communities, experiences of fellowship were found to be transformative. Geering argues that Paul never intended his words to be law. Like

so many others at the time, Paul was merely writing it as he saw it, addressing situations in whatever way he felt most appropriate, and accommodating his style to the needs of the moment. It was only in subsequent arguments about the exact nature of God, soon to be described as the trinitarian “godhead”, that his words were argued to be Truth (with a capital “T”).

If a single God could be argued to be of three persons and one substance (already confused by translation of oblique Greek terms into Latin), then there is nothing to stop it from becoming something else. We’re reminded of John A. Robinson positing for us that if we can change our thinking of God as being “up there” to “out there,” then we can start thinking of God in entirely different terms than “out there,” too. Surely, Geering emulates Robinson’s reasoning: if we can be as fast and free with the concept of God as one would have to be to create the doctrine of the trinity, then we can do almost anything! Non-theism is one of those “almost anything.”

Amongst the tectonic thinkers Geering notes is William of Ockham whose “razor” required that if an explanation for something could be made without bringing God into the question, then we’d best leave God out of it. Ockham, who explored the realities of his existence in the 13th century, couldn’t possibly have foreseen the impact of his words on the understanding of God but they are startlingly clear to us. Simply put, as science has been able to explain more and more of what we experience in the world, God is needed less and less as an explanatory factor. Indeed, when we can understand the evolution of any life-form as the simple trial and error progressions exposed in Richard Dawkin’s *The Blind Watchmaker*, there is little reason for us to hold onto God as explanation at all.

In truth, Ockham had also introduced the notion that ideas were the creation of those who had them. They do not exist distinctly awaiting our discovery but, rather, come into being through our own creative efforts. Again, Ockham could not possibly have had the clarity of vision that would have allowed him to extrapolate the application of his thinking to the concept of God. He lived in a world very different from ours. But Geering takes note and assigns him a place of esteem in the transition of Christianity from theism to non-theism.

Free to create

Once we recognize that it is absolutely acceptable, if not necessary, to explore beyond the idea of god as a being, we can come up with all sorts of ways of thinking about god (if we still want to, that is) that are unorthodox, that is, not protected by the church. We might, for instance, consider that god is what exists between two people, you and me, perhaps. Whatever we choose to honour what exists between us, we strengthen the god in our world; if we desecrate our relationship, we do the opposite. It’s up to us.

Or we might think about god as everything that is good in the world. We often do, anyway. Life will be good or bad, and we might try to think of god as only being the good stuff, and the bad as something else. The church used to tell us that it

was Satan, or more likely, human nature; I don't buy it and, I warrant, neither do you. Sure, we screw up, but the idea that we are evil by our very essence seems deeply wrong. Restrict access to that kind of *mea culpa* thinking. Make it one of the things from which the church must protect us. It's too easy. There is just too much bad stuff that isn't anybody's fault—like tsunamis and category 4 and 5 hurricanes, earthquakes that wipe out whole populations. It's not possible for us to take responsibility for all of that and, without access to that theistic all-powerful God (remember, the church in this imagined scenario is preventing us from falling back on the old answers and starting to force us to think differently) we have nothing to blame. So we are left with the responsibility of facing even the bad stuff with whatever strength and courage we can muster, as confounding as it is, and holding each other through the worst of it, counting on each other for finding and creating enough good stuff to get us through the night and into the next day. If that's the case, we're strengthening god, building god up in the world, one little act or smile at a time.

It will be very important for us not to create new dogma. Presbyterian (USA) minister and author, Jim Dollar, cautions us in his book *The Evolution of the Idea of God*. “We don't need another doctrine of God to add to the pile. We just need to torch the pile.” He is right: we have way too much dogma as it is. “To replace an old doctrine with an updated doctrine merely perpetuates the practice of creating words without referents, and we debate the doctrines, and lose the center, and treat those who oppose us in ways that are not God-like regardless of how well we articulate our Godly views.” We must be very careful not to get it down just right, to leave room for creativity, for space to feel a different way of god, a new way to speak of our experiences.

I'm going to try to stop using the word “god” altogether. John Robinson suggested that way back in 1963. That we didn't take him up on it has cost us decades of exploration time. But I'll try to drop the word “god” because I know you, and I know that every time I use that word, try as you might, you're going to go back to some sort of idea of god as a being or some otherworldly person. From now on, I'm going to use some other word—maybe breath or love or pyntrilm. I like pyntrilm. I made it up. The emphasis is on the first syllable though it is very nice on the second, too. But I think you'll probably think it's a proper name instead of, maybe, a verb and go right back to thinking about you-know-what/who as a being. So I don't think I'll use pyntrilm, either. We'll see.

As we create new means for celebrating the vast number of ways we experience and are drawn into the sanctity of life, dropping that not-to-be-spoken-again word will seem to be a big thing. It really isn't. If you think it is difficult, just think how easy it has been to begin using inclusive language. Well, okay, maybe it will take time. But substituting words is something we do all the time. In the first sentence of this paragraph, for instance, I needed a different word for “ways” or I was going to have to use it twice. “Means” worked pretty well, so I dropped it in. We actually do it all the time and are almost unaware of it. Doing it with the word “god” will

take some practice but is not impossible by any stretch of the imagination. One of the most difficult parts, and it may take a while to realize just how difficult, is imagining a way that is not active, that does not act upon you or me or anyone, that lacks the quality of agency. Don't worry about that too much to begin with. Just using new terms will sweep a lot of old stuff out onto the dust pile and make room for the imagination to stretch and rethink and create. You'll get to the absence of being soon enough.

My son, in a creative writing class, was given a piece of paper with 101 different ways to say "said." Here are 101 ways to say "that word." Most are nouns. Some are adjectives. A few are verbs. Playing with the words helps us play with the concept and playing with the concept can help us experience it in incredible new ways: blessing, love, spirit, essence, being, light, heat, hope, sacred, holy, one, ground of all being, shining, flow, groundedness, lightness of being, emptiness, immensity, deep, joy, understanding, awe, life, deep unto deep, relate, creativity, healing, delight, whole, whole-i-ness, dream, strength, centre, root, intimate knowing, questing, power, wedge of possibility, stillness, grounding, whisper, heartbeat, thunder, longing, passion, compassion, spiritwork, womb of all life, truth, resonance, peace, edge of hope, laughter's echo, intimacy, goodness, sense and non-sense, depth of being, ineffable, nothingness, that which is between, wealth of understanding, care, kindness, visionwork, depth of meaning, urge toward life, hallowing, shadow, window of opportunity, silent, pulse, purpose, forgiveness, mercy, wonder, absence of being, music, turbulence, order, justice, mirror, beginning, right relationship, it is when we _____, access, inexpressible, intangible, absence of sorrow, gift of life, promise of healing, world of blessing, realm of promise, surge of joy, all that's worthy, fulfill, presence, wellspring of life, thrill, song, voice, heart.

As we seek to move beyond images that have constricted us and allow ourselves to embrace the beingness of our own divinity, choosing to see and celebrate each creative, life-affirming experience as holy, we will slowly and steadily release the theistic grip in which we have held all that we have called good. We will let it free to grow and develop amongst us. It will be in our laughter, in our loving, in our caring for one another. It will be when we act justly and choose to fill another's need before our own. It will stir us toward sincerity, to the truth of who we are. It will well up from within us and overflow in kindness and delight. We will know it in our relationships, in our efforts and in the depths of our souls. And we, too, will have been set free.

114. When sharing the work of theologians and scholars who have influenced my thought, I do so as a practitioner who has benefitted from their wisdom. I am not a theologian or academic and have integrated their thought into the practice of ministry. It is also important to note that these

authors may have found their way to conclusions that are far different from mine; it is their companionship on the journey for which I am grateful, regardless of our ultimate destinations.

If we choose to speak of God, we shall be using this term to focus on all that we supremely value and on the goals which make human existence meaningful and worthwhile...”

- Lloyd Geering, *Tomorrow's God: How We Create Our Worlds* (1994), p. 194

115. While at theological college, I was not taught to engage god as a being or expected to deepen my relationship with that being in the way in which those I know who attended evangelical theological seminaries were encouraged to do. I read, explored, and considered the *concept* of god and the many ways in which others had engaged it whether they understood god to be a being or not. Concepts are human constructions which cannot exist without the human mind.

116. Because my evangelical colleagues and my liberal and progressive colleagues all use the word “god” to describe their own personal understanding of that word, it is difficult to engage without further explanation.

God is a symbolic word...it has no external referent which is open to public confirmation. The word ‘God’ has become a functional term whose content depends on what we (subjectively) put into it, and this process...had its beginnings in the bible, where the prophets denied the objective reality of the gods but retained the word ‘God’ for that to which Israel should give its allegiance...God is not a word which has ever had one fixed meaning for all people.

Whether any of us continues to use the word god or not has now become a matter of personal choice...There is no necessity for us to use the word ‘god’. It is not even essential for us to use it in order to talk about faith. If we do use the word, we open ourselves to misunderstanding and confusion...It certainly does not mean for me what it meant for the ancients, including even Jesus of Nazareth...or what it means for the traditional theists of today. I do not believe, for example, that the word is the name of a spiritual being who planned and created this universe and who keeps it in his control.”

- Lloyd Geering, “Faith and doubt on the margins.” Presented to the Sea of Faith Network (NZ) Conference, 4 October 1997, p 115 & 117.

117. Geering's argument that the word 'god' has no external referent (noted above) should, in and of itself, moot our ability to use it in the many, often contradictory ways that we do. He goes on to use Gordon Kaufman's definition of the word to further his point.

Theologian Gordon Kaufman suggested that the term 'God' could have a function in a secular word to denote 'an ultimate point of reference', so that 'To believe in God is to commit oneself to a particular way of ordering one's life and action. It is to devote oneself to working towards a fully humane world within the ecological restraints here on planet Earth, while standing in piety and awe before the profound mysteries of existence.' (Kaufman, *In the face of mystery*, p. 347) If indeed that defines 'belief in God' few would call themselves atheists...It must be conceded, however, that most people in the past assumed the descriptive definition and took the term 'God' to be the name of an objective, living, and thinking being" who created the world and still controls it, and with whom they communicated "on personal terms and expected to have their prayers answered.

- Geering, p. 132

118. Kaufmann's own words:

Since much about the world was completely unknown to our religious traditions, and this significantly affects the way in which God had been conceived, theologians dare not simply take over traditional ideas; we must be prepared to criticize every use and interpretation of the symbol "God" that has appeared to date.

- Gordon Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (1993), p. 28-9

119. Not long before Lloyd Geering was charged with heresy by the Presbyterian Church in New Zealand, Bishop John A. T. Robinson had published his slim volume *Honest to God*. In it, he shares both his own views and those of several prominent and widely accepted theologians. Despite being dismissed by C. S. Lewis as not saying anything new, the book rocked the ecclesial world by putting into the hands of the laity material that had previously been secured behind the oaken doors of theological academia.

It is difficult to criticize [supernatural theism] without appearing to threaten the entire fabric of Christianity—so interwoven is it in the warp and woof of our thinking. [But the centre of the debate is concerned with] how far Christianity is committed to a mythological, or supernaturalist, picture of the universe...

What Tillich is meaning by God is the exact opposite of...a supernatural Being to whom one can turn away from the world and who can be relied upon to intervene from without. God is not 'out there'. He is in Bonhoeffer's words 'the "beyond" in the mist of our life', a depth of reality reached 'not on the borders of life but at its centre'...in Kierkegaard's fine phrase, by 'a deeper immersion in existence'. For the word 'God' denotes the ultimate depth of all our being, the creative ground and meaning of all our existence.

So conditioned for us is the word 'God' by associations with a Being out there that Tillich warns us that to make the necessary transposition, 'you must forget everything traditional that you have learned about God, perhaps even the word itself.' Indeed, the line between those who believe in God and those who do not bears little relation to their profession of the existence or non-existence of such a Being. It is a question, rather, of their openness...to the sacred in the unfathomable depths of even the most secular relationship.

To believe in God as love means to believe that in pure personal relationship we encounter, not merely what ought to be, but what is, the deepest, veriest truth about the structure of reality. This, in face of all the evidence, is a tremendous act of faith. But it is not the feat of persuading oneself of the existence of a super-Being beyond this world endowed with personal qualities. Belief in God is the trust, the well-nigh incredible trust, that to give ourselves to the uttermost in love is not to be confounded but to be 'accepted', that Love is the ground of our being, to which ultimately we 'come home'. If this is true, then theological statements are not a description of 'the highest Being' but an analysis of the depths of personal relationships—or rather, an analysis of the depths of all experience 'interpreted by love'. Theology, as Tillich insists, is about 'that what concerns us ultimately'. A statement is theological not because it relates to a particular Being called 'God', but because it asks ultimate questions about the meaning of life.

To assert that 'God is love' is to believe that in love one comes into touch with the most fundamental reality in the universe, that Being itself ultimately has this character...The [one] who acknowledges the transcendence of God is the [one] who in the conditioned relationships of life recognizes the unconditional and responds to it in unconditional personal relationship.

- John T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (1963), p. 47-49, 53, 55

120. John Shelby Spong argues for an understanding that pulls us beyond theism as well.

There is no God external to life. God, rather, is the inescapable depth and center of all that is. God is not a being superior to other beings. God is the “ground of Being itself. And much flows from this starting place. The artifacts of the faith of the past must be understood in a new way if they are to accompany us beyond the exile [life beyond traditional church], and those that cannot be understood differently will have to be laid aside. Time will inform us as to which is which.

God is not external to life but is rather the Ground of life itself, the Being in which all being is rooted...Such a God is, however, not a theistic god. It is a God whose Being emerges as all being is enhanced, whose Life is revealed as all life is lived, whose Love is manifested as all love is shared, and whose identity is revealed when barriers are broken and community is formed.

Paul Tillich has suggested that God must be perceived not as a being – not even the supreme being or the supernatural being but rather as the ground of all being. The Ground of Being is not external to life. It is rather present in the being of things.”

- John Shelby Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile*, (1998). p. 70, 164-5

We today do not think in natural/supernatural categories. God is not for us a human parent figure...that worldview has passed away.

- John Shelby Spong, *Rescuing the Bible from fundamentalism* (1991), p. 236

121. Jerome Stone, whose work on transcendence and morality has deeply affected my thinking, has his own special definition of “God”.

Normally I prefer to use “sacred” or occasionally “divine” as an adjective or adverb. However, I find that other people (and I myself in the past) have used the term “God.” So I have developed what I call a minimal definition of God for purposes of conversation and common worship, a translation device for communication between various religious voices: “God is the sum total of the ecosystem, community and person empowering and demanding interactions in the universe.” Another way I have of speaking of God, when I have to, is to say, that: “God is the world perceived in its value-enhancing and value-attracting aspects.” The term God can put an end to thinking, either in the fanaticism of belief or of unbelief. My point is that the theoretical term “the transcendent” and the devotional term “God” (minimally understood) share the same reference to situationally or relatively transcendent resources and challenges, a radical naturalization of the idea.”

- Jerome Stone in “Is God Emeritus? The rebirth of a forgotten alternative”

122. Don Cupitt, whose work has spanned decades in time and crossed several theological boundaries (and sometimes returned back over those same boundaries in the opposite direction), further elucidates the challenges facing those attempting to define god.

We have inherited and we still use an extraordinary miscellany of idioms, ways of thinking and speaking about God. Nothing guarantees in advance that they will all fit together into one tidy systematic construction. Quite the opposite, for what we have is a jumble of fragments from kits acquired at different times in the past. Many pieces have been lost, and of those that survive some are more useful than others. No single logical thread ties them together. We have to try to make what we can out of them; but we must remember that the more pieces we incorporate the more ragged and unstable will be the thing we construct, so it may be better to leave a good deal of material unused in the interest of building something stronger, more coherent...people used to think that the Church or the Bible gave them a ready-made construction...today, though, our new sense of history and our closer study of the individual pieces has shown us that the Bible and the Christian tradition present us with something...which grew slowly over many years with some substantial additions, and also many small losses that went unnoticed...

God is...not a personal god...but a spiritual and consciousness-raising conception...truly transcendent...gradually the cozy objective personal god of the past is expelled and replaced by the more spiritual and demanding concept. The shift is oddly difficult to describe. We can try various vocabularies, moving from heteronomous to autonomous faith, from a realist to non-realist conception of God, from a metaphysical to an existential faith, from an external God to a God within...and so on...all are unsatisfactory...a long process of refinement or purification...Call God a transcendent and unvarying reference-point for assessing human life whose potency lies precisely in the fact that he is not part of this changing world...call him a pure guiding spiritual idea; or cut out the personal pronouns altogether and speak only of a religious imperative: whatever your preference, it is hard to find the right words for God who is not an objective being, not a person, and does not exist as things exist...For God traditionally has two sets of attributes, the metaphysical and the moral. the metaphysical attributes decisively separate him from the world of fact, insisting that he is not in space or time and has no body, parts or feelings. In short, he is like a pure ideal; and his moral attributes also remove him from the world of fact. Thus he is love, period. Not any particular love, neither an object-selecting love nor a selectable love-object, but love simple, universal and objectless – and therefore not himself an object. Indeed, the Christian ideal of love as universal, disinterested and selfless rules out the notion that God can be an objective personal being, because he cannot be thought of as one who is singled out from others as the preferred love-object, nor as one who himself singles out preferred objects of his love. So the ideal of love requires the decentering of God; and so also it is with God's other attributes of justice, wisdom, beauty, goodness, and the rest.

- Don Cupitt in *Radical Theology*, chapter entitled: “God beyond objectivity”, p. 67-69

123. I was recently privileged to speak with the Very Reverend Marion Pardy at length as she prepared to speak to Gower Street United in St. John’s, Newfoundland, on the issues currently facing the United Church. In her sermon, which she generously shared with me, she, too, reflects on the difficulty of pinning down a single definition.

We use words and metaphors for God, such as the best that we know in “father”, the best that we know in “mother”, the best that we know in “friend” or ... “Immortal, Invisible, God only Wise”. Psalm 23 rolls off the lips of some of us within a certain age and stage; it is the most requested Bible reading at funerals; people in hospital frequently request it for it speaks of comfort and strength at fearful and lonely times. We hear good news in God as a Good Shepherd. Few of us, I expect, view God, as some of us did as children, as an old man or some other personage or supernatural Being in the sky, controlling and ordering the affairs of earth, and, to my fear as a child, recording all the “bad” things I was doing! Without having definite words, we are apt to think of God as Presence or Peace, as Love, as Source of Life, etc. But words, metaphors, and music, drama and dance, art and the artistic are our only tools to describe the “indescribable”.

- Marion Pardy, “What about God and Jesus ...?” Sermon delivered at Gower Street United Church, St. John’s Newfoundland, April 17, 2016.

124. The late Marcus Borg and I argued over whether the church should retain Christian language by reinvesting it with new meaning or leave it behind. He believed that to leave it behind would compromise the future of Christianity; I believed that retaining it would do that very thing only more quickly. Our disagreements were always amiable and his loss has been huge to the Christian community.

The superego is the critical voice in our psyches, a voice that stands over us in judgment, offering praise or blame. The superego is the storehouse of ought’s and shoulds within us, the cumulative product of messages received in our socialization about what we should do and how we ought to live. Most often, it is experienced as a punitive voice. Life under the superego is a life of continually trying to measure up; it is life under the law. Yet life under the superego is the most common adult way of being, the natural product of our socialization.

The monarchical model of God commonly reinforces the superego. The internal dynamics of the model and the superego are the same: the superego functions in our minds as a little king, an internal lawgiver and judge. It is thus easy to confuse the voice of the superego with the voice of God, especially when the voice of the superego has Christian content. God becomes “the internalized overseer, the policeman who never sleeps.” More lightheartedly, it is God imaged as a high school principal unhappily leafing through our records. When this happens, the Christian life becomes confused with life under the punitive superego. We are never good enough.”

- Marcus J. Borg, *The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic Contemporary Faith*

125. The late Nigel Leaves, another brilliant scholar who died far too soon, did much to expose the work of Don Cupitt and Lloyd Geering to audiences wider than they may have otherwise gained.

[T]o outline what I perceive to be the most crucial area of religious discourse for the New Millennium – what I have called the “God problem”. Reduced to its simplest terms, the issue is whether to adopt a realist or non-realist understanding of God. Is God real or simply a symbol of our ultimate concern? ... I have used the writings of Don Cupitt and Lloyd Geering as templates for non-realism... I incline toward non-realism; the reason is that I find it the most intellectually compelling reading of Christianity. I am nonetheless poignantly aware that we, myself included, whose cultural roots are in Western Christianity, find it emotionally difficult to throw off the final vestige of belief in a being, essence, or principle greater than ourselves.”

...[W]hat does it mean to say that one has experienced the God-presence? Its very subjectivity calls into question the objectivity of which it claims to speak. How dependable is religious experience? ... [T]he phenomenon is not necessarily as trustworthy as its advocates suppose. “

- Nigel Leaves, *The God Problem: Alternatives to Fundamentalism*. Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 2006, p. 77, 81

126. Robert Wright, whose massive book, *The Evolution of God*, brought together many normally disparate elements into a cohesive argument for the pursuit of something called god in contemporary society that may or may not be already beating within the heart of the Abrahamic religions – but also outside them – offers an afterword, the title of which, beginning as it does on

page 444, is cheekily amusing, “By the Way, What is God?” In it, however, he does the final weaving together of those disparate elements into what it is we all yearn for and which, it seems, might be the ultimate, or, in other words, “god”.

Though we can no more conceive of God than we can conceive of an electron, believers can ascribe properties to God, somewhat as physicists ascribe properties to electrons. One of the more plausible such properties is love. And maybe, in this light, the argument for God is strengthened by love’s organic association with truth – by the fact, indeed, that at times these two properties almost blend into one. You might say that love and truth are the two primary manifestations of divinity in which we can partake, and that by partaking of them we become truer manifestations of the divine. Then again, you might not say that. The point is just that you wouldn’t have to be crazy to say it.

- Robert Wright, *The Evolution of God*, 2009, p. 459

B. The Trinity

127. I was interested to find that the texts about the Trinity that I read as a teenager exploring The New Curriculum argued that the doctrine was, basically, incomprehensible without elaborate metaphorical undertaking. I’d forgotten that my skepticism regarding the doctrine had gone back so far. But at the Symposium on the Draft Statement of Faith which was held at Church House in 2005, even those considered conservative thinkers in the United Church were compelled to explain the doctrine with story.

128. The Reverend Connie den Bok, in a powerful and image-laden sermon, shared a picture of the Trinity as a challenge to the Christian church to work toward and live within community. The Trinity, she convinced us, was about our primal and god-created need to live in community. Although I doubt the originality of Rev. den Bok’s image of the Trinity as a symbol of community, it was a compelling presentation and almost convinced me of its continuing worth as a theological construct for those who find it helpful.

129. The Rev. Den Bok's sermon, however, underscored the perspective I had shared with the Symposium: our need to share our vision and our understanding in terms that can inspire and uplift *because they are understood without need for special instruction or interpretation*. Many clergy in the United Church are gifted speakers. Many of them are also poets and artists. Creating images and stories to illuminate complex theological concepts is something they are well-gifted to do. I have no issue with their doing that work. And if they never have another new person or someone who was absent on the day of their eloquent sermon on this or that theological concept, there will be no problem going forward. If, however, there were a few regulars absent that Sunday or if newcomers should arrive at the service one week without the privilege of having heard the minister's carefully constructed metaphors, misunderstanding will ensue. I don't think we can afford misunderstanding if we have something we believe is crucial to the communities we serve and those beyond our walls who need the messages of inspiration and engagement that we have to share.

130. The concept of the Trinity is one of our most challenging. The following scholars wrestle with it and have been helpful in the development of my own thought.

131. Don Cupitt, author of numerous books discusses the opacity of doctrinal statements the church has issued over the centuries.

[T]he grand dogmas of historic ecclesiastical Christianity are not strictly scriptural ... Western Christianity's great doctrinal epic is a strange and splendid midrash, a work of art, a very detailed romance loosely based upon the Bible ... very obscure to us, because it reflects lost ways of thinking.

The doctrines of the Trinity and incarnation ... have become so opaque that no theologian since the Enlightenment has been able to spell out what they are supposed to mean in a way that is intellectually coherent, morally acceptable, and moderately plausible, whilst at the same time being acceptable to the faithful as an articulation of what they believe themselves to believe.

- Don Cupitt, *After All: Religion without Alienation* (1994)

132. Robert Funk, founder of Westar Institute and its Jesus Seminar, poured his life into the work of extracting from the Gospel narratives what he considered to be historically accurate. In his foreword to Lloyd Geering's *Christianity without God*, he illuminates the author's understanding of the Trinitarian God and why we should learn to live without that God.

Is Christianity tied irretrievably to a traditional doctrine of God? ...Geering has reframed this question as a thesis: Christianity should learn to exist without God. He believes we must take leave of God if we are to refurbish Christianity with terms and incentives suitable to the global age we are now entering. He states that the doctrine of the Trinity began a humanization of God – “God and world were being rejoined”, but “the Church intervened on behalf of a father deity and a patriarchal hierarchy.” He suggests that by leaving the concept of God in the past, human freedom, basic human rights, and respect for all of nature will be affirmed. “Christianity has reached the stage at which it must learn to exist without God—without an external authority figure who blesses and condemns arbitrarily. In place of that deity he challenges us to assume responsibility for ourselves and for the earth we have inherited.

- Robert T. Funk, in Lloyd Geering, *Christianity without God* (2002)

133. Geering's thought on the Trinity also appears in *The Once and Future Faith*, a book edited by Funk.

As the primitive Christians looked into the future with faith based on their current experience, they expressed the substance of their faith...in the form of the Holy Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We in turn must draw on our basic experiences of reality to express our faith for the future ... This hope rests upon putting our faith in the secular trinity of the world, humanity, and global consciousness.

- Lloyd Geering, “The Secular Trinity” in *The Once and Future Faith*, ed. Robert W. Funk (2001), p. 49

134. Geering tackled the subject in a paper delivered to the New Zealand chapter of the Sea of Faith, an organization that explores questions of faith beyond traditional boundaries and named for a BBC series which examined the work of Don Cupitt in the mid-1980s. (The phrase originates

in the poem “Dover Beach” by Matthew Arnold.) Here, Geering acknowledges extreme demands that the doctrine places on credulity.

Theism (belief in one God) was radically modified by the incorporation of the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation ... The doctrine of the Holy Trinity...is no more than a humanly devised formula to safeguard certain very important areas of Christian experience which were thought to be beyond human understanding:

- the rejection of the gods as supreme beings in favour of the one God they worshipped who was related to the world and human history
- the influence of the man Jesus of Nazareth
- the experience of vitality in the fellowship of the new church, the Holy Spirit

This solution was arrived at only after bitter debate ... many solutions were offered which seemed to make a lot more sense than their final solution ... the doctrine ... was not adopted unanimously and unity was achieved only by casting out of the church those who disagreed ... Was it really intended to make sense? Was it not primarily intended to reconcile warring parties in the church by finding some verbal compromise which would be accepted by the majority?

[F]rom the Enlightenment [onwards], as more and more people gained the freedom to think for themselves, they faced a dilemma. Either they simply repeated the traditional creeds—including the doctrine of the trinity—and pretended they understood it, or they thought for themselves and fell into one of the ancient heresies.

- Lloyd Geering, “Christianity minus theism” presented to the Sea of Faith Network (NZ) Conference, 7 October 2000, p. 151

135. Bishop John Spong, in his search to locate the point at which one meets what he calls sacred, includes the Trinity, perhaps because of its baffling construction, as one of those places behind which that elusive place of holiness might be found.

God is love ... penetrating, opening, life-giving, ecstatic love ... this was the experience that sought to find verbal forms in such creedal concepts as the Holy Trinity, the incarnation, the virgin birth. It is not the creedal words that are sacred but the reality of the experience that lies behind the words. That is where holiness is met. The God who is love cannot be approached in worship except through the experience of living out that unconditional quality of love. This is why the church must be broken open and freed of its non-inclusive prejudices.”

- John Shelby Spong, *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism* (1991), p. 239

136. Nigel Leaves quotes Karen Armstrong from her book *The Case for God* as she argues that the mere question of god's existence is proof that the symbol has failed.

Paul Tillich pointed out that it is difficult to speak about God these days, because people immediately ask you if a God exists. This means that the symbol of God is no longer working. Instead of pointing beyond itself to an ineffable reality, the humanly conceived construct that we call "God" has become the end of the story. During the early modern period the idea of God was reduced to a scientific hypothesis and God became the ultimate explanation of the universe ... many of us forgot that religious teaching was what the rabbis call *miqra*. It was essentially and crucially a program for action. You had to engage with the symbol imaginatively, become ritually and ethically involved with it, and allow it to effect a profound change in you. That was the original meaning of the words "faith" and "belief".

137. He goes on to further explore her thought ...

Reduced to its simplest terms, Armstrong's thesis is that the fundamental concern of religion has long been and should still be not to provide proofs of God's existence, but to help people "discover new capacities of heart and mind." The result will be to foster "spirituality" that "is expressed in practical compassion" and "the ability to feel with the other ... to live creatively, peacefully and even joyously with realities for which there are not easy explanations," people will once again honor the "ineffable mystery they sense in each human being and create societies that protect and welcome the stranger, the alien, the poor and the oppressed.

- Nigel Leaves, *Religion under Attack: Getting Theology Right* (2011)

C. God as Father

138. Fortunately, after leaving theological college, exposure to the masculine portrayal of God as Father diminished. Although I was settled into a pastoral charge in which many of the members held an image of God that was masculine and fatherly, the use of genuinely inclusive language allowed for them to continue to engage in worship and study with their depiction of god whether or not it was what I had in mind when I was sharing my thoughts.

139. A workshop that I used to explore gendered images for god included the distribution around a room of photographs from magazines. Participants were invited to choose one or more images that reflected their conception of god. After some paired or small group discussion, the images would be shared in the wider group, we'd talk about what they meant and then move on to the non-masculine images for god that were present in the Bible. The point was to invite people to embrace images that were other than predominantly male although those images were also available as a way of inviting them to be receptive to non-masculine images.

140. It was some years after the last time I had needed to engage a congregation in gender-inclusive language training that I realized people in those sessions had not only been choosing images that weren't masculine, they had mostly been choosing images that were not even anthropomorphic. The photos I provided included people and nature, colours, textures, and activities. Of all the times I used that file of photos, only once do I recall someone choosing the traditional image of God from Michelangelo's ceiling in the Sistine Chapel. The rest of the time, people chose pictures of sunlight or water or children laughing or elderly hands entwined. They chose photos that depicted emotions and nature. They eschewed photos that represented god, the being. For the most part, away from the lyrics of their favourite hymns, people had left the idea of God, the Father behind somewhere in the past.

141. It sometimes seems as though the Church, in many ways, remains sluggish when it comes to these changes.

Even though most religious communities declare God to be beyond sexist and sexual categories, ... the divine is universally designated by the use of masculine imagery; and the founders of the major religions were all males. Moreover, the feminist critique of Christianity—led since the 1960's by notable radical women theologians such as Daphne Hampson, Mary Daly, Monica Furlong, Rosemary Reuther, and Carol Christ—has met stiff resistance ... Calls to redefine the doctrine of the Trinity—replacing “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” with “inclusive” categories ... have for the most part fallen on deaf ears. Indeed, many feminist

theologians have become so frustrated with the Church's lack of support for their ideas that they have declared it "irredeemably sexist" and have left.

- Nigel Leaves, *Religion under Attack: Getting Theology Right* (2011), p. 148.

D. God as Son

Jesus never claimed to be the Son of God. - Lloyd Geering

142. We desperately wanted to know God. We desperately wanted out of the dreadful situation we were in. And the god/man we created in order to save us is still slaving away all these centuries later because, after all that, we're still in a mess and we're still desperately looking for salvation.

The doctrine of the incarnation evolved by a series of steps ... [T]he process can even be documented within the New Testament – the concept developed from Messiah, to Son of God, to Lord, to Saviour, to Logos or Word of God, to God and creator, to the human enfleshment of God (incarnation) ... Where was this process of raising Jesus to divine status taking place? It was not a cosmic event. It was taking place in the minds of Christians ... a human construction.

From our vantage point in the modern world we are in a better position to appreciate the fact that these doctrines were constructed by human minds; they were not divinely revealed. Indeed, everything which has been claimed to be divinely revealed is in fact of human origin.

- Lloyd Geering, "Christianity minus theism," presented to the Sea of Faith Network (NZ) Conference, 7 October 2000, p. 154-155

143. The following is an excerpt from *With or Without God*. It was written to underscore the importance of recognizing what Geering said is true: we created the creator and we created his only begotten son.

Jesus: A Human Being

When we reconsider the concept of god and work our way toward exploring it differently than we have in the past, the whole idea of Jesus being the Son of God no longer makes much sense. Although we will have travelled a very different route, we find ourselves arriving at a place similar to that achieved by the Jesus Seminar, that group of scholars who gather to share research on the historical Jesus. Here we see the story of a man who lived his life in a relatively enclosed geographical area and who spent his short adult years travelling from town to town

sharing his ideas about what is important in life. We might find that he seems to have lived in ways that exemplified our newfound understandings of god, honouring the sacredness of his relationships, challenging his peers to live radically spiritual lives, but even as we do, we will recognize our own interpretive biases being laid over the ancient picture the evangelists portrayed.

We will also see the way the church stretched, pulled, and reconfigured the story of Jesus to give us that Son of God it said we had to have. With the help of scholars and authors who make academic research accessible, we will have set before us a very human Jesus, a man of emotions, wisdom, desires. But we will not have the Son of God.

Having acknowledged that, we need to ask ourselves whether it is worth our time and effort to continue to focus so much of our attention on his life, his sayings and his activities. Does it make a difference to how we read the Gospels if we are reading about what the Son of God said and did or if we are reading what a charismatic Middle Eastern teacher and healer said and did two thousand years ago? Of course it does.

The gospel writers' perspectives have been deftly exposed by scholars over the past century or so and most recently by those of the Jesus seminar. As they have sifted through the evangelists' words and discovered the real blood and gristle Jesus who walked the Galilean lakeshore and spoke to anyone who would listen, they have found themselves essentially aligned with the perspective Schweitzer had presented a hundred years ago. Accounting for the various audiences toward which the texts were written—Greek, Gentile, and Jew—and the purposeful direction of the writing, scholars, using very credible means, have clipped and snipped the fluff of the gospel accounts away and have found that, in the end, there is little left for us to get a good hold on. I doubt if they, like Schweitzer, had anticipated the result of their work—the picture of a man incapable of carrying either the weight of the world's sins or two thousand years of devotion upon his meagre shoulders and one who, truth be told, would have been shocked to see that he had.

It seems that Jesus, born into a world that presented him with a pre-set world view within which he lived his short life, had much to say to the people with whom he lived and worked and travelled. That is, at least, how he is presented by the evangelists. But, stripped of the designation as God's only begotten, complete with its requisite claims to salvation, there is nothing that he said or did that we must take more seriously than anything said by anyone else. By that I mean that what he is purported to have said or done may, indeed, have been remarkable for his day and time and may, indeed, prove to be a provocative material challenging us to think more justly and compassionately even unto today. We need listen and watch, however, only with the same attentiveness we would give to any person or piece of literature, film, or art, pop, classic or otherwise. Our interest is not only for diversion, but for inspiration, not only in passing time but in being affected,

not only in positioning who we are in the greater scheme of things but in clarifying who we are. The purpose of our attention to any of those people or things is the possibility of transformation and, for this, there is no more import in the stories of Jesus than there is in any of the stories we see being lived out around us. We take from them the strength that may challenge us to live toward the good more fully and leave what is left over, what does not inspire and/or challenge us, defined, then as entertainment or diversion. When Jesus is not understood to be God, the stories of his life, the things that he said, the way that he acted, none of these have the power of God attached to them. They become stories and we are freed to read them as such.

Yet, we remain fascinated with the man, Jesus, and so it is important that we read the stories about him first hand as though watching a movie, and decide for ourselves what we will call significant and what we find not to be so. I'm going to propose a different way to look at what Jesus is purported to have said, done and thought. My method requires three things. A blue highlighter and a yellow highlighter and a modern translation of the gospels that you aren't afraid to mark up. (You need blue and yellow because you'll want to use both of them sometimes and come up with green. Yes, you can use pink and yellow if you have to.) Sometimes, it is helpful to also have a gospels parallel book. It places, side by side, all the stories that are present in two or more gospels. So, for instance, you can see what the birth narrative in Mark (there isn't one) looks like compared to the one in Matthew (the wise men), Luke (the shepherds), and John (there isn't one.) That can save a lot of time and give you more than a few extra things to think about. However, if you don't have one at hand, don't put off this exciting project waiting to get one for Christmas. Just jump right in with the basics.

Once you have your things together, you are ready to do all the Jesus study you'll ever need. Remember, this is not TAWOGFAT (The Authoritative Word of God for All Time). It is just a book. And you are not a scholar extrapolating THE MEANING that God put in there for you to find. God did not write it. There is no THE MEANING. There is only the possibility that something might resonate with you, challenge you, tug at something you need to think about a bit more, disgust you and make you ask yourself why you're disgusted. That's all.

Decide which one of the highlighters is going to be for good stuff and which of the highlighters is going to be for bad stuff. You get to say which stuff is which. As you read, you'll want to work with whole stories or segments of stories within the different books although you will also find that within a particular story, Jesus is purported to have acted in a particularly negative manner, or saying something that really ticks you off. Feel free to mark these separately from the rest of the story. They are significant and you'll want to be able to see when and with what kind of regularity that happens. Read until you come to an obvious end to whatever the particular narrative is and then decide whether to do the whole thing or parts of it as good stuff or whether to highlight the whole thing or parts of it as

bad stuff. By the time you've finished, you should have highlighted almost everything except, perhaps, the stage directions. They're pretty neutral.

It actually only takes about 25 minutes to read the Gospel of Mark so you might want to begin with that one. It's the oldest gospel, anyway, so it makes a good starting point.

It can be very stimulating to have someone else or a group reading through the gospels using the process at the same time you are. You will find that there are differences of opinions on a wide range of things and the conversations that will come out of those different perspectives have the potential to be rich and interesting. Some of you will come with a feminist perspective. Particular things will affect you as they may not affect others. Some of you will come with a pacifist perspective. The same thing will happen with different results. Each perspective and each person reads any piece of literature differently.

Here are some questions to keep in mind as you read.

Is Jesus acting in a way you would be proud of where he your son/brother/friend or not?

Does this story evoke a good feeling in you or a bad one?

What do you make of it?

How would you see the story if you were one of the characters in it?

The exercise is only to assist you in seeing Jesus as he has been represented by a variety of voices. My hope is that you will have used both highlighters by the time you are finished, not just one.

Some of the things you might notice about Jesus during your anarchic highlighter waltz through the gospels will be new to you. They've always been there, of course, it is just that we haven't spent a whole lot of time looking for them. The liberal gloss through which the gospels have been read has been thick. We've grown accustomed to the gentle Jesus of our childhoods. Or, if we believe ourselves to be radicals, every now and then, we've resonated deeply with the idea of tossing tables—even if we haven't had the courage to do it ourselves. But there is much to discover and think about. Like these provocative thoughts on the humanity and therefore fallibility of Jesus, and our remoteness from most information about him. They were prepared for me for use with a study group at West Hill United Church, the congregation I serve. Not at all a comprehensive study of Jesus, the list was intended to draw attention to material right in the text or ideas drawn directly from it that challenge the idealized picture we've held for so long. Once you've caught the idea, it will influence your reading every time you open the book.

- Jesus wrote down nothing we know of, and what was written about him was written years after he died; we cannot know with any degree of certainty whether we are hearing the words *of* a person named Jesus, or the collected thoughts of the early church *about* a person named Jesus.
- no other historical record contains anything about Jesus' miraculous works or resurrection; we only have the words of those who believed he was the Messiah or the Son of God, a decidedly biased view
- what *was* written is compromised by many instances of miraculous deeds, done for select people or situations
- he declared no intention of starting a new religion, or even another version of Judaism - he was just emphasizing certain parts of his Jewish faith as true spirituality
- his teachings about love and forgiveness are found in the Hebrew Scriptures and other religions long predating him
- he taught a mixture of beliefs, some of which are helpful, some of which are markedly unhelpful, e.g. divorce, hell & eternal punishment
- he is not recorded as having attempted to change any oppressive forces, but taught people rather to acquiesce (turn the other cheek) – a stance which is fine to a point, but not at all helpful in ending slavery, racism, patriarchal hierarchy, etc.
- if our explorations find that he was a humble, sincere teacher, we can then assume that he would not want generations of people to be worshiping him, singing about him, praising him. On the other hand, he might be very pleased that we agreed with some of his teaching.
- all human leaders are fallible and themselves broken and imperfect. Jesus is not portrayed this way in the New Testament. He is an idealized figure and all his ideas are presented by the evangelists as being right. Some of those ideas, however—banishment to hell, damning the fig tree, deriding his followers, etc.—we would now say are wrong. If we say we follow Jesus without clarification, we allow the assumption that we agree with all of all his ideas, including the bad ones.
- many claims recorded as having been made *by* Jesus are unsupportable and exclusive: I am the way the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me (John 14:6). I am the gate: whoever enters through me will be saved. (John 10:9). I am the resurrection and the life (John 11:25). If you believe you will receive whatever you ask in prayer. (Mt. 21:22)
- many claims made *about* Jesus in the New Testament – some by him, some by Paul, Peter, John, and unknown authors – present a highly exclusive way of salvation. e.g. The elect will go to heaven (2 Peter 1:10-11), the unchosen will not. Jesus is the Lamb of God sacrificed for the sins of the world, and only they who believe this will go to heaven. All will bow their knee before Christ., etc.

- Jesus' moral teaching is not outstanding. It would have blended in with that of countless other spiritual leaders, and may have been superseded by many who actually did more to put their words into action

It isn't all bad and it isn't all good. Not everything in a bad book is bad. Not everything in a good book is good. There are some interesting things that we can put in our satchel, pull out every now and then and look at, muse over, reconsider. Those are the bits worth keeping. Those are the bits that make the story worth reading. And those are the bits that you will find yourself coming back to over and over again. Let the rest slip through your fingers and settle into the dust of two millennia of misunderstanding.

144. My mentor and friend, Bishop John Spong, writes abrasively about the traditions of the church. Perhaps that is where I honed my edge. But his words are welcomed by so many who have long felt the need to stretch their intellectual legs and found no room in the pews to do so. He has written much about Jesus. The book he studies most is the Bible.

I believe in Jesus, called Messiah, or Christ.

I believe that in his life this transcendent reality has been revealed so completely that it caused people to refer to him as God's son, even God's only son. The burning God intensity was so real in him that I look at his life and say, "In you I see the meaning of God, so for me you are both Lord and Christ."

I believe that Jesus was a God presence, a powerful experience of the reality of that Ground of Being undergirding us all at the very depths of life.

- John Spong, Epilogue, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile*, 1998

145. The Jesus Seminar, too, has had considerable impact on the study of Jesus and the evolution of belief alongside the Seminar's bold proclamations of the limits to what we can say we really know about the man. Bishop Spong is considered a conservative among their ranks. The Seminar's work has pushed scholars to explore beyond the "frame" of what we have believed Christianity to be about in order to explore what our religious inheritance has to offer an increasingly secular world. It is in the intersection of the religious and the secular that I find space for the vision of a

sustainable future to flourish. Cupitt and Geering, in fact, find the secular deeply embedded in the root narrative of our faith. Not only is there room for a vision, it grows directly out of our tradition. This is some of the most compelling reading I have come across other than the original articles by Geering and Cupitt to which *Leaves* draws the church's attention.

[T]heologians Don Cupitt and Lloyd Geering ... have argued that Christianity can survive without being wedded to a traditional doctrine of God. Christianity, which comprises much more than a set of beliefs in a supernatural God, contains a number of humanistic ideals. To be sure, these flowered most noticeably during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment when the focus of western culture shifted from an otherworldly realm to establishing a just kingdom here on earth; but Geering and Cupitt go a major step further to argue that the seeds of humanism lie within Christianity itself, especially in the life and teaching of its founder. For them and for an increasing number of Christians, Jesus is not the divine figure promulgated by the Church, but a radical, humanistic, secular figure. In particular, they have accepted the groundbreaking research and conclusions of the Jesus Seminar concerning the historical Jesus ... the portrait of the Jesus Seminar was that of a wandering oral Jewish sage who proclaimed a message of universal love and kingdom that had already dawned ... Jesus showed himself a humanitarian ... a visionary prophet who preached good news about the transformation of people and this world." [quoting Don Cupitt] "If Jesus was a 'secular moral teacher, an Eastern sage, a teacher of wisdom,' whose central message of a new 'Kingdom' (sometimes translated 'realm' or 'reign of God') aimed at the creation of a more just society and better relationships between people, then he would have been disturbed by Christianity's emergence as a religion focused primarily on creedal orthodoxy and the establishment of an institutional church.

...

After many centuries, the prevailing Western culture to which Christianity gave rise discarded the supernatural doctrines and immersed itself in the "secular message" of Jesus. As Cupitt sees it, this culture owes everything to Jesus; indeed, it is "Christianity objectified and secularized" and represents Christianity's final form as it shakes off supernaturalism and returns to what Jesus originally proclaimed—humanitarian ethics. In fact, he argues, the secular West is more Christian than Church Christianity, for it follows Jesus' teachings more faithfully than the Church, which remains fixated on its own survival ... [T]he Church is committed to supernatural beliefs that cannot be squared with life in the postmodern world ... [T]he radical utopian message of the Jesus of Nazareth is in the ethical humanitarianism and religious humanism of the secular West ... far from being the antithesis of faith, secularism has come to be committed to an ethical humanitarianism that cares for those in need solely on the basis of our co-humanity, and regardless of race, color, gender, sexual orientation, doctrine, or moral deserving ... [A]ll the hard-won improvements in the physical and social well-being of people everywhere point to the slow but gradual realization of the

kingdom on earth ... [A]s Lloyd Geering expresses it: “the humanistic and secular world is to be seen as the legitimate product of the ever-evolving Christian culture of the West.” Church Christianity was never intended to be more than a temporary phenomenon, and with the advent of secular humanism it can give way to the Kingdom and let Christianity fulfill its original promise ... [quoting Geering] “[O]ut of the chrysalis of Christendom there is currently emerging a new kind of society—a global, humanistic and secular society” ... a Kingdom of peace and justice irrespective of creed, ethnicity, and sexuality. “Instead of continuing to walk the ever-changing path of faith from Abraham onwards, the churches have ... become blind to the cultural situation that they have now entered. This prevents them from seeing that the modern secular world, far from being the enemy of Christianity, is the legitimate continuation of the Judeo-Christian path of faith in the modern era.”

- Nigel Leaves, *Religion under Attack: Getting Theology Right*. (2011), p. 173, 176-7, 179

E. God as Holy Spirit

146. With the phenomenal growth of the “nones”, many of whom have been claimed to be “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR), one would think that the tolerance for language about the Holy Spirit would be on the rise in churches. It may be, but not at West Hill. That’s because what others might describe with those words can be described with words that are much easier to understand and that can appeal to anyone, not just those who identify as SBNR.

The Christian thinkers of the past five centuries expressed their values and aspirations by speaking of their God as the Holy Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit ... we must acknowledge that the world we live in looks very different from the way it looked to those ancient Christian thinkers ... Today we use the word ‘spirit’ metaphorically, if we use it at all. Where they talked about spirit as the substance of reality, we do so in terms of electrons, quarks and nuclear forces ... Reality for us is what we can confirm with our senses and what is open to public investigation. All the rest, including religion, philosophy, and science, is human interpretation and this remains open to continual review.”

- Lloyd Geering in “The secular trinity” in *The Once and Future Faith*, ed. Robert W. Funk (2001), p. 42

The word spirit and its derivatives “reflect the dualistic world-view” of the ancient and medieval worlds, dividing reality into the physical and the spiritual realms, with humans living in both, temporal and eternal. Christians speak of God as spirit

and refer to the ‘power of the Holy Spirit.’ But “spirit has no substance at all ... a purely abstract term that has no external referent ... a frozen metaphor from a now obsolete worldview, and its only possible meaning is a metaphorical or symbolic one ... If we continue to use such terms as spirit and spirituality, we must first make clear what we mean by them. Semantic issues have increasingly become a problem with many religious terms.”

... the word spirit is useful to refer to a special kind of vitality and/or to the highest qualities of personal existence ... a dimension or aspect of human existence that is over and above emotion, volition and cognition, though it contains and depends upon all three ... closely associated with the highest values or qualities we associate with personhood ... spiritual qualities mentioned in Galatians as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control ... qualities that cannot be labelled intellectual and cannot even be called moral, though some of them certainly have moral implications” ... some for our inward personal life and others for our personal relationships.

- Lloyd Geering, *Reimagining God: The Faith Journey of a Modern Heretic*, 2014.

147. In his most recent work, *Reimagining God: The Faith Journey of a Modern Heretic*, Geering refers to the work of Martin Buber who “considered it a mistake to think of spirit as some intangible thing within us” but rather explored the concept as what is around and between us, treated metaphorically. It comes the closest to what my understanding of god is. “[Buber] was referring to that ‘indefinable something’ that brings cohesion and quality to the life of a society as ‘relation’; nurtured by the way we relate to one another at a personal level.” When we do that with respect, offering dignity, compassion, and love to the other, we are creating god. And I think we need more of that, more than new liturgical rituals and roles. So much that, should we choose to engage in the undertaking, we could employ every heart that identifies as Christian and still struggle to get the work done.

148. Perhaps that work falls to the secular community, to the public places that will be secured for those who wish to live in a world beyond the beliefs that divide. Perhaps the church is too tired to take that work on.

We seem to be living through a time in which one part of humanity is beginning to claim autonomy or self-governance for itself and to acknowledge that meaning now has to be discovered in the life process itself. We may be no closer to understanding why there is a world, but we are now able to accept the fact that the world itself is the source of the values and meanings we prize most, not some hypothetical transcendent reality which did none of the work yet claims all the credit. One way to express this is to say that the spirit is now engendered by and encountered in the world in which we find ourselves. Rather than positing an external force to account for our most cherished experiences, we begin to understand how they were generated within us in response to the life process itself ... this is mystery enough to be going on with, without hanging on to ancient hypotheses that now create more problems for us than they solve.

- Richard Holloway, *Looking into the Distance: The Human Search for Meaning*. p. 28-31

F. Commitment to God

149. If we are speaking about the concept that Lloyd Geering describes in *Coming Back to Earth: From Gods, to God, to Gaia*, I am entirely on board.

If we continue to speak of God, we are pointing to the values, goals, and aspirations that motivate us to follow the path of faith ... the personal attitude of trust and hope that we humans manifest as we both interpret the world in which we live and respond to its demands.

- Lloyd Geering, *Coming Back to Earth: from Gods, to God, to Gaia* (2009), p. 1, 9

150. If, however, we are forced to continue to use an exclusive Christian or religious language, then I see the structures that have supported this precise work, this development of values and transformation of hearts to the work of living them out, embedding them in our structures, and handing them from one generation to the next and to the next, faltering and losing the ability to continue that work. The world is too fragile and the work too urgent to reserve it to the few who gather on Sunday mornings to sing songs that fill their hearts with joy but do little to engage the world beyond their doors. Committing myself to god may mean exactly the same thing to me as it means to a colleague down the street. Let her continue to use that language if she chooses. I have

no interest in pressing her to do otherwise. But I feel it is my duty to speak to those who do not wish to use such language and to work with them to create a sustainable future in which generations to come will hallow and embrace the very values we have held sacred for so long.

G. Call to Ordained Ministry

151. The conversation about what constitutes an ordered ministry has been ongoing in the church for decades. The conversation opened up at the 42nd General Council meeting will be ongoing for at least the next three years. Until I am confident that my ministry will continue in The United Church of Canada, I will enjoy being a bystander to this conversation.

H. Ministry of Word

152. In the documents I prepared for the Conference Interview Board at the time of my ordination interviews I shared the following in response to how I saw my vocation, choosing from a prepared list of possible roles. Each of the three I chose addressed one of the elements of “ordained” ministry at the time.

Teacher

... I see my role to be one of informed teaching, helping the laity to grapple with and grasp the meaning behind sacred texts. This is particularly pertinent when working with congregations who, today, may be relatively illiterate in terms of the Bible. Remaining involved with our scriptures is necessary if we are to remain involved with our God.

- From my Conference Interview Board submission, 1991.

153. I continue to see my role as that of teacher at the same time as I consider myself a student of those with whom I serve. I am always, always stretched by the people at West Hill and those I meet elsewhere who are bringing their whole selves to the work of turning the world toward beauty. I bring the social justice issues and the poetic creativity that creates an inspirational space;

they bring the respectful relationships, the courage to be, the grace of acceptance and the fury of indignant rage. They are my teachers as much as I am theirs.

154. Several years ago, I stopped using the lectionary to determine readings for the Sunday services at West Hill. Each Sunday, I would choose a passage and interpret it for use in the service. On occasion, I rewrote, revised, reworded, reclaimed, reinterpreted as seemed warranted by the passage. I still maintain that practice and introduce passages as seems appropriate from time to time. The Elements Committee has given me leave to choose readings from any source and to include biblical readings only when I see fit.

155. The sole criterion for the reading of a text in the Sunday Gathering at West Hill is that it be worthy of the people gathering there. Many of the lectionary passages do not meet that simple criterion. Many of the biblical passages not included in the lectionary also do not meet that criterion.

156. There are, however, libraries filled with works that edify the human spirit, convict us of self-centredness, or place before us a vision of what we might attain should we press our shoulders against the systems of oppression in the world. We choose readings mostly from these sources, ancient and new, poetry or prose; each one has something profound to offer the people of West Hill. These are the words that I share with them.

I. Ministry of Sacrament

Priest

I understand the church and, timidly, the world, to be the body of Christ. Factions within this body are irreconcilable to my understanding of the realization of the Realm of God. It is through the sacraments that we, the Christian church, the UCC, perhaps only the single congregation, can begin to get nourishment to even our small sections of that body. Perhaps, when we have accomplished health in our particular organ, we will be prepared to nourish and receive nourishment from other parts of the body.

- From my Conference Interview Board submission, 1991.

157. This choice of role and description raised eyebrows at the time but had emerged quite naturally out of my reading of Teilhard de Chardin. Over the years, my language has changed considerably but the concepts underlying that language have not strayed so far as they might have seemed to have done. I consider myself to be deeply connected with all of life and interdependent upon it as each piece of the body is dependent upon the others. While I wouldn't use the term "Realm of God" any longer, I continue to be an idealist, holding before both myself and my community a vision of what we might achieve, realize, dream into being "one fine day." And I am very aware that we are nourished by other parts of the body, perhaps most deeply by those poets and activists who are intent on making the vision of that fine day known to us. They nurture my spirit and I am daily grateful to them for their insights, energies, and example.

158. The following is an excerpt from *With or Without God: Why the Way We Live is More Important than What We Believe* related to the impact on the sacraments that the loss of a divine Jesus might have.

While it is prayer, a key component of any Christian lifestyle, that is challenged when old concepts of an interventionist God are disputed and replaced, letting go of doctrinal understandings of Jesus hits the church hardest in another of its most vital areas. The sacraments, those rites that have long been associated with Jesus' salvific power, can have little magic left when contemporary scholarship strips Jesus of his uniquely divine status and leaves him only a Middle Eastern peasant with a few charismatic gifts and a great posthumous marketing team.

Most protestant churches recognize at least two sacraments—baptism and communion (the Eucharist)—while the Roman Catholic church recognizes five more—reconciliation, confirmation, marriage, the anointing of the sick, and the taking of holy orders as members of the male clergy. Each is offered by the church, the repository of God's grace, to the people, the sinful, as a way of creating, affirming, and repairing their relationship with God (salvation). In Baptist congregations, baptism and communion are symbols that reflect the choice for salvation that an individual has already made. There, they don't have the same "efficacy" that they do in most other mainline protestant denominations or the

Roman Catholic Church but only because the salvation, according to them, has already happened.

The power of the sacraments derives from the idea of humanity as being fallen or sinful and in need of redemption or grace. If we think about it for any length of time at all, the implausibility, if not the impossibility, of that idea becomes embarrassingly clear. God, in his high heaven, creates a world that is perfect but introduces into it human beings. Then, he sets those human beings up to fail (the temptation and fall) and damns them to an eternal punishment (life on earth for some, life in hell after death for others) that can only be mitigated by regular adoration of him and the slaughtering of countless birds and animals (to say nothing of the first-born children who were very likely slaughtered earlier on) so that their blood could be offered as a sacrifice. Salvation is available only by faith or by works. When that doesn't seem to do the trick, he sends down his own child to be slaughtered on behalf of everyone but, because that seems just too simple, he makes it only possible for anyone to get the advance to go card if he or she either utterly believes that's what God was really doing (salvation by faith) or that he gave the church the right to decide who gets it by carefully distributing the sacraments of grace and she or he goes and gets those sacraments regularly (salvation by works). Pondering that *précis* discloses an incredibly capricious and masochistic God in whom I can't imagine anyone actually wanting to believe. And, if our rational minds, as a result of our study and reflection, have rejected first the concept that we are inherently sinful and then its corollary, that we need and can receive redemption from some outside source, the doctrine of original sin and its counterpart, salvation, whether by faith or works, becomes nonsense.

Your personal share of the world's sins

There are few of us, however, who, in our most private, reflective moments, don't doubt our absolute goodness. Whether it is the result of years of chronic emotional abuse at the hands of the church or the pervasiveness of its most destructive doctrines throughout western culture, most of us, by the time we've hit adulthood (and often too long before) have deeply entrenched feelings of inadequacy and unworthiness. And, in the course of a normal week, we find plenty of fodder upon which those feelings can feed. We stumble. We fail. We make mistakes. We hurt ourselves and others. We yell at our kids. We ogle the neighbour's wife (or husband). We wish our parents would die. We're jealous of our friend's happiness. We fill our bodies to the bursting point with plastic food, pharmaceuticals, legal and illegal (alcohol and crack) consciousness-altering drugs. We put other people down so that we can feel better about ourselves. We aren't pretty or good-looking enough, strong or healthy enough, to prove to ourselves that we are blessed. Or, on the other side of the coin, we're not generous enough, loving enough, we don't give enough to charity, we're too absorbed in our middle-class privilege. Wherever our minds settle, we are not worthy.

Our culture picks up on our fears of inadequacy and builds us up with the mantra "You deserve..." When we really think we are undeserving, it offers us a rich

market of “affirmations” that will do it for us. The school of positive thinking (its most recent incarnation is the book *The Secret*) dangerously tells us anything we want badly enough to believe we are worth getting it, we will get—we only have to believe in ourselves and our inherent worth. If we don’t get it, we manage to confirm our original belief that we really weren’t worth it or we blame ourselves for not believing enough. The ego-building industry, build on the solid foundations of our own perceptions of unworthiness, has been safely in the black for years.

Set down into a culture of pervasive self-loathing, the belief that someone somewhere sees us as perfect and whole and forgiven despite every screw-up we’ve ever accomplished is a very, very powerful thought, indeed. It is cleansing, healing, restorative. It is transformative. Lives are made whole. They are saved. I’ve seen it. I’ve felt it.

Any evangelicals worth their salt, after reading those last few sentences, have promptly tipped their chairs back from the table and declared victory. The transformation of so many lives stands, in an evangelical mind, as sure proof of God’s eternal goodness and love. Salvation, in such a mind, is a once and for all grace. You feel that forgiveness, you acknowledge it comes from God through Jesus and you’re saved. And once you get salvation, you keep it. Roman Catholics would join our evangelical friend in arguing that those who feel their burdens lifted after a soul-baring confession and mass are undeniable proof of Jesus’ redemptive work.

Wait just a minute. Rewind the tape. Now where did all the weight of that unworthiness come from to begin with? Let’s see.... We’re told a book called the Bible is the word of the most powerful God and it tells us that we are sinful by nature and can’t do anything worth doing without his help. Hmmm. Let me check this out. Yep! It works! I’m feeling lousy about myself all over again!

Could it not be that what is lifted from our shoulders in those powerful moments is not our own unworthiness but the weight of the doctrines of the church? And, could it not be that when we are told it is gone forever, we experience overwhelming joy? Or, could it not be that if we are told it is gone only for a few days that we will feel compelled to return and receive whatever it is that has taken that weight away again? Whether temporarily lifted by the Catholic priest or permanently excised by the born-again experience of salvation, the release from such a burden is powerful beyond measure. The human spirit is immense. Its suppression is heinous. If it has really only ever been those doctrines that have weighed us down so pitifully, wouldn’t it be a much better idea, a much more humane idea, a much more loving idea, to just offer up the truth about them to all and sundry and start nurturing a society of humans that acknowledge not only their own, but their neighbour’s dignity?

Yet the church seems bent on continuing to lay the phenomenal weight of doctrinal sin upon the shoulders of humanity rather than take it upon itself. Even in moderate liberal congregations where the idea of salvation is more corporate than personal, the sacraments are laden with the melodic language of another time and draw the unsuspecting participant, through the use of communal responses and actions, into complicity with the initial intent of the rites. The *kyrie*, often set to incredibly stirring and evocative music, underscores the dreadful, sinful state from which only Jesus' intercession can save us.

For many, new words offer a necessary departure from the history out of which the sacrament has grown and allow them to participate in something that would otherwise be only a negative experience for them. Guests at a Sunday service once confessed their desire to bolt when they found, much to their dismay, that communion was to be served. Neither of them had taken communion in years, being unable to stomach its routine theological propositions. But before they could make their way back out of their seats, the service began and courtesy held them fast.

Because these guests were excruciatingly aware of what was being said, they experienced the act of communion differently than others might have. They listened to the words rather than losing themselves in the actions. Once we open our ears to the traditional liturgical words, we find them utterly offensive—as we should. And because it was the words that had offended these guests elsewhere, finding a place where the words had integrity and were not connected with sin, sacrifice, and atonement, they could experience the gift of communion as a celebration of community, of our commitment to live in community.

Can the sacraments ever be anything other than what they were initially intended to be? When we change the words, strip the sacrificial overtones from the rituals and symbols, do we really rinse them clean of the power they have come to wield? Can we make them something beautiful or will the stain of original sin always be present in the reflection of the baptismal basin or smeared like blood across the table? I expect that, no matter what we say, communion will still have a strong emotional power for those for whom it brings solace. And for those for whom the words are only offensive, I hope that, along with the awakening that made them so, came the realization that there will be no need for the sacraments in the next incarnation of church. In the meantime, should they find themselves presented with communion in the midst of a worshipping community, I hope the words through which it is offered celebrate the beauty of their own whol-i-ness.

159. **Baptism or Celebration for the Life of a Child:** We do not use traditional Trinitarian language for our baptismal services, which we increasingly refer to as Celebrations for the Life of a Child, but we do not provide a baptismal certificate either. Parents or individuals being baptized

are advised of the fact that we are not performing a rite that would be recognized by the World Council of Churches. We have not had anyone express concern to us about that.

160. Prior to the service, parents are asked to identify three characteristics they wish to nurture in their child. There are three saucers of sand set up in the Gathering Hall. Parents are invited to name one of the characteristics they have chosen at each saucer and place a lit taper into the sand. In response, a member of the congregation commits to supporting them in their endeavour to instill their child with that characteristic and also places a taper in each saucer. When the three saucers have been attended to and three characteristics named, we share in the following litany.

COMMITMENT TO THE JOURNEY: An Affirmation of Faith

Leader: You come to this place bringing your child(ren). You speak for them. Their care and nurture is entrusted to you. You bring them here to commit both them and yourselves to a life of faith, a journey with ever new experiences and challenges. Do you see the act of baptism as a symbol of our celebration of the life of your child, filled as he or she is with that which we would name sacred, the urge toward life, its fullness and its beauty? If so, please say, "I do."

Parents: I do.

Leader: Do you believe that as we share the stories of life, yours, ours, those of your children and those of people of wisdom and faith who have gone before us, as we share those stories, we can come to experience life more fully? If so, please say "I do."

Parents: I do.

Leader: Do you commit yourself and your children to a journey with this community of faith, seeking to find and nurture the wholeness within yourself, your children and the world? If so, please say "I do."

Parents: I do.

CONGREGATIONAL COMMITMENT

One: We gather at this font
to celebrate the spirit of life

that connects us all
and through which we come
to love ourselves, one another
and the whole of creation.

All: This font and the water in it,
are our symbols of community
and our common need
for the refreshing waters of the life.

One: Through water we are born,
of water we are made,
by water we are sustained.
Each of you, whole and loved, yet knows the need
for support and care upon the spiritual journey.
As these individuals gather
to commit to the journey through baptism,
let us pledge our care to them.

All: We stand as witnesses to the commitment
these people make to the journey of faith
and pledge ourselves, through the symbol of this water,
to their love, support, and care
as they discover and create love
in the life that will unfold for them.

The Symbol of Water

(adapt to reflect commitments made by parents)

(the following is one of several statements that have been approved by the
Elements committee for use when placing water on the child's forehead)

I baptize you in the name of Love :
its beginning and its end,
its commitment and its challenge
its promise and its power.

(At the conclusion of the ceremony, the child is given a candlewick anklet with
the words, "You are the light of the world" and walked through the congregation
by a member.)

161. **Communion:** Our communion service has evolved under the leadership of the Elements
Committee. Over the course of many years, it has developed after the style of the communal meals

described by John Dominic Crossan as having been the original format in communities of the early church. These descriptions can be found in *The Birth of Christianity*.

162. Symbolic representations of the elements are set up in the Gathering Hall in preparation for communion. Other food items sufficient for a congregational meal are prepared and set on mobile tables in an adjacent room.

163. The service of communion unfolds at the conclusion of the rest of the Sunday (or special) service. The following excerpt from *With or Without God* gives an idea of how the tradition of communion is imbued with new meaning.

Within the congregation for which this liturgy was written, baptism is understood to be the declaration of a commitment to the spiritual journey or quest by an adult or on behalf of a child by her or his parent(s) or guardian. It is a commitment to live with an awareness of one's spiritual nature, value, worth, and connectedness to the rest of humanity and creation. Such an understanding of baptism leads easily to the celebration of communion as a symbol of recommitment and nourishment for that journey.

We come to know one another around tables. We share our lives around tables. Relationships grow in intimacy around tables. We look one another in the eye around tables. That we gather around a table to share our struggles, take strength, and go out again to the world, is fitting and good. This is what we see ourselves to be doing as we gather for communion.

Because we are reclaiming a very powerful symbol, however, it is essential that we reiterate what we are doing every time we participate. If we assume that everyone understands our new interpretation of communion, the power of the previous meaning could easily overwhelm it for any who were new to the community or weren't confident of the new symbolism. For that reason, the liturgist welcomes the community to the table or to the time of communion with the following or similar words:

One: It is around the common tables in our lives that we come to understand nourishment, love, challenge, and caring. We gather around them in our childhood to share our days' adventures. As adults, it is there we reconnect with friends and family grounding ourselves in what is real. In our senior years we share the wisdom we have become with those who sit at table with us. We are cared for there. We face challenge there. We look into one another's

eyes and face truth there. Tables are a powerful part of our lives.
Tables are an ordinary part of our lives.

So it is that we gather here today—to be about what is, for us, at once both common and exquisitely beautiful. In this community, we pledge to be strength and encouragement for each other on the spiritual journey, to wrap our hearts around one another as we travel together. And it is here, at this table, that we symbolize the power of that pledge. The road is long and, too often, we are weary. When we gather here, as we look into the eyes of those we know or do not know, we see the light of love and feel our hope lifted.

164. The following Great Thanksgivings (plural is intentional) has been used for the past several years on World Wide Communion Sunday in October.

We stand a world apart
from those in other lands
who, too, bow their heads
in full and ripened gratitude
for satisfactions such as ours —
pains relieved,
lessons learned,
hopes renewed.

Their eyes scan strange horizons.
Feet scuff their presence upon distant soils.
The meaning of the words
with which their thanks is lifted
is locked in tongues we may not comprehend.
Their gods don't rise before us;
there are no deities to whom we offer praise.

But human hearts beat with a universal rhythm.
They thrill at beauty, love, and grace.
Pain stamps its matching stain on all our bodies.
Hope, no matter whence it comes,
feels much the same.

We are the people of Pangaea,
Once one, we've staggered far beyond our home,
pushed apart by forces we cannot remember,
to distances that saved us from our fractious selves.

And we have soothed our solitudes
 by the stories we have told.
 They have whispered tales of privilege to us
 and stirred our hearts
 to fear those within whom
 our common blood flows.

The time has come for our reunion.
 Far stronger than our differences,
 what makes us one –
 our love, our tears, our hungers –
 pulls us back toward each other.
 Our mythic, riving stories –
 useless to the challenges we face –
 now start to fade.
 Their hold upon us loosens
 and we are freed to cast new dreams
 into a future we will never see.

May those visions
 shine humility before us –
 reverence as we ponder one another's lives.
 May they humble us
 by what we hold in common,
 teach us truth
 and give us strength to hear it told.
 And may new legends
 call us forth to grandeur,
 to living large and wonder-filled and free,
 and may they build within us
 a pledge to seeing in all
 a sacred beauty only we,
 as the people of Pangaea,
 can name.
 May our challenges
 be answered only
 with compassion and respect.
 And may our future be filled
 with great thanksgivings offered
 by those who walk together

in dignity and love.

Only we can make it so.

165. Once the Great Thanksgivings is read, the symbolic bread is broken and the juice poured. The food is brought into the hall and the congregation partakes of the feast. There is only passing reference made to the meal that inspired the gathering and no “words of institution” are recited.
166. Some further influences on the evolution of the concept of sacraments at West Hill:

A discussion of religious symbols is basically an exercise in human self-understanding... the goal of every religious aspiration is for us to become human beings who reach wholeness and complete maturity.”

- Lloyd Geering, “The Search for a ‘World Theology’ in a Radically New Age” in *Journal for the Study of Religion*, vol. 1, no. 1 (March 1988), p. 325

[F]ar from being the enemy of Christianity, the truly secular life is the legitimate continuation of the Judeo-Christian tradition. The traditional worship of God has widened into the celebration of life.

- Lloyd Geering, *Coming Back to Earth: From Gods, to God, to Gaia* (2009)

[T]he church of the future must examine those liturgical moments that have traditionally been wrapped around the major transition points of human life. If they are to survive the exile, they, too, will have to be rethought in nontheistic categories. The baptism service of entry into the life of the Christian Church has been a liturgy so filled with the theistic language of a supernatural deity as to be repugnant to an increasing number of believers today. It speaks of a cosmic fall requiring a cosmic act of redemption. In any developing liturgical rite, we must journey beyond offensive assumptions ... must discover a deeper and more profound experience and meaning behind the act of baptism, or it cannot continue to be part of the Church of the future.

When we look at baptism non-theistically, we discover that the question implicit in the moment of every person’s birth is “Who am I?” ... Baptism ... becomes, then ... a ritual that calls each candidate to be all that that person was created to be. It becomes a powerful starting point for entry into nontheistic worship.

- John Shelby Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile* (1998), p. 195

J. Ministry of Pastoral Care

Facilitator

I chose the word facilitator over pastor or counsellor because I think that it encompasses these words as well as directing the focus beyond myself to the resources, spiritual, community, etc., upon which I draw and encourage others to draw upon when I am in the position of doing pastoral care.

- From my Conference Interview Board submission, 1991.

167. Even the words “doing pastoral care” grate on me as I reread this statement twenty-five years later but I am resisting the urge to edit the language of half a lifetime ago. I do not, in fact, provide counselling beyond the very basic elements of pastoral care. Early in my ministry, I recognized that I did not have sufficient training to provide the kind of counselling that many people require and so I refer congregants to other, more qualified counsellors when such needs arise.

168. But I am still reaching beyond me to access resources I can use and offer to others. It is a continuous circle of support that runs through my ministry.

Faith is a matter of saying “Yes!” to life in all of its planetary complexity. Even while shedding many of Christianity’s past symbols and creedal formations, the secular path still honours the abiding values it has learned from its Christian origins. ... [The concerns of the secular life are] the pursuit of truth, the practice of justice, and the nurture of compassion, freedom, and peace.

- Lloyd Geering, *Coming Back to Earth: From Gods, to God, to Gaia* (2009) p. 63

...[C]an it be said that the more deeply we live, the more passionately we love, and the more we discover the courage to be, the more we become revelatory of God – a God now understood as the ultimate reality, the essence of life? Can that process of becoming our true and real selves now be seen as a new way of understanding what the bible was trying to say ... was it not these very qualities of selfhood – the ability to live, to love, and to be – which were observed in the life of Jesus ... if we can grasp these possibilities or at least be willing to explore these tiny cracks leading to a different way of thinking about God, and if the Holy God can be understood not as a person, but as the depth and ground of life itself,

then the ethical task of the church becomes quite different ... Christian ethics are found in a call to the fullness of life ... the church's task is to assist its people in plumbing the depths of their own humanity, where transcendence, mystery, being, and even love are discovered, and to bring those qualities found in the center of life into the world."

- John Shelby Spong, *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism* (1991), p. 165-6

K. Exercise of Ministry

Creativity has an answer. We are told by those who have studied the processes of nature that creativity happens at the border between chaos and order. Chaos is a prelude to creativity. We need to learn, as every artist needs to learn, to live with chaos and indeed to dance with it as we listen to it and attempt some ordering. Artists wrestle with chaos, take it apart, deconstruct and reconstruct from it. Accept the challenge to convert chaos into some kind of order, respecting the timing of it all, not pushing beyond what is possible—combining holy patience with holy impatience—that is the role of the artist. It is each of our roles as we launch the twenty-first century because we are all called to be artists in our own way. We were all artists as children. We need to study the chaos around us in order to turn it into something beautiful. Something sustainable. Something that remains.

- Matthew Fox, *Creativity*

169. The exercise of ministry is for me the work that is done on the edge that exists between chaos and what is yet to emerge. It takes place in the moments of every day when they turn to crisis and it takes place in the moments of crisis as they turn again toward life. I am privileged to live in this place with people whose hearts and hands bear the same work bravely, humbly, and passionately. They teach me much and, together, we have learned to hold the space of chaos until newness is born.

L. Exercise of Ministry in Accordance with the Scriptures

170. It may seem strange to advise you in one paragraph that I no longer regularly use scripture readings in our services and then attempt to tell you that the readings we do use manifest the exercise of my ministry "in accordance with the scriptures". However, I believe the authority of

the text does not come from its providence. The authority of the text comes from the merit of its content.

171. The most lasting gift in my understanding of the Bible that I received while at Queen's Theological College was the idea that an over-arching theme could be construed from the text against which the text could then be measured. I cannot even say where that understanding came from, whether a study of the scriptures, a systematics lecture, or in exploring the original languages. I just know that I came away with the idea that one could discern an overarching theme of "love" or "right relationship" and then evaluate the text against that theme.

172. Because my study of the Bible was nonsensical if it was anything other than a test that would strengthen my ability to love or induce me to strive toward right relationship, those themes are the ones against which I have relentlessly pressed the text. In the end, much of the text was found wanting; too many stories wrestled too fiercely against those ideals.

173. For that reason, I seek the themes elsewhere but consider that these themes constitute, in some boundary-less way, a canon of our own making, scribed by thousands of hands as they have translated the work of love and right relationship from the peculiarities and strengths of thousands of lives. There is no limit to the word, in my opinion. It continues to flow from the people with whom I live and work and love and the countless others who will add to it that I will never meet. It will continue to flow long after I am dead and gone.

[T]rough the centuries Christians came increasingly to view the Bible as the depository of divinely revealed knowledge ... judged to be wholly true ... and even more liberal Christians still tend to depend ultimately on the Bible in making final pronouncements on matters of doctrine and ethics. ... [W]hat the Bible does not do is to provide for all time an authoritative account of what humans should believe and do. In particular, the Bible does not provide tangible evidence of the existence of God, or infallible knowledge about the divine nature and will ... it always has been, and still remains, a set of human documents ... written by humans and reflects the limited knowledge, as well as the common assumptions and prejudices [of its cultural contexts].

- Lloyd Geering, *Christianity without God* (2002), p. 10

Though the idolizing of the Bible ... is most clearly to be observed in fundamentalists or biblical literalists, it is by no means absent from the church in general, though there it often takes a more subtle form. The church has shown a great reluctance to acknowledge openly that the Bible, being of human authorship, reflects human fallibility ... the church must acknowledge that in some matters the Bible is wrong and has become a blind guide; and this applies not only to questions of historical evidence but even more seriously to vital issues in religion and ethics.

- Lloyd Geering, *Reimagining God: The Faith Journey of a Modern Heretic* (2014), p. 157

M. Exercise of Ministry in Continuity with the Faith of the Church

174. Similarly, I do not see the faith of the church as something that can grow and develop exclusively within the constraints of doctrinal belief.

Religion is primarily not about supernatural belief but about hope. It is our communal way of generating dreams of how we and our life and our world might be made better. We prepare ourselves for the dream, and we start to think about how we might actually start to make it all come true ... the so-called “decline of religion” is people’s abandonment *en masse* of the kind of ecclesiastical religion that promised comfort and reassurance in the face of death. Instead we should see religious thought and practice as imaginative and utopian. Religion is a communal way of reimagining and remaking the self and the world. It is what we are to live by and what we are to live for.

- Don Cupitt in a paper presented to the Sea of Faith Conference, 2000

[M]any [people outside the church] ... live in accordance with a non-supernatural, non-creedal humanism that has its origins in Christianity. They have appropriated those teachings of Jesus that hold out the hope of a new realm where everyone is valued and humanitarian concerns are paramount; they have given up their old religion but gained a new one ... indeed it would be highly informative to find out exactly how many Westerners live in accordance with the ethics of Jesus but do not acknowledge his divine status there are probably more than most people think, and they are nearly always overlooked.

- Nigel Leaves, *Religion under Attack: Getting Theology Right* (2011), p. 182

175. In 2012, at the 41st General Council, the remit on the Statements of Doctrine was accepted and three statements of doctrine took their place alongside the Articles of Faith. The three statements were approved by the Category Three remit but I do not believe that the remit included a question about the Articles of Faith being placed as subordinate documents alongside the others. Neither do I believe that the question about the Bible being identified as the authoritative text to which the others would be subordinate was posed to the membership of the church. The reasons why these two questions did not need to be included in the remit are unclear to me.

176. Nevertheless, we now have a doctrinal hierarchy in the church with the Bible situated at the apex and the four statements of doctrine subordinate to it.

177. That does not, however, represent either the United Church that I know and love or the United Church that has long laboured to realize the truths inherent in the relationships we create, realize, and with which we wrestle. Our history does not tell the story of a denomination that has subjected itself to the authority of the Bible. It tells the story of a denomination that, over and again, has subjected the Bible to the authority of love.

178. The continuity of the faith in the United Church in which I was raised and to which I continue to give my life is alive and well in the ministry I share with the people of West Hill United Church where our actions, our decisions, our entire life together and beyond, in the families and communities we serve is pledged to that higher authority: the authority of love.

Our Response to Life is Love

We choose love as our supreme value, understanding love to mean the choice to act responsibly with justice, compassion, integrity, courage and forgiveness.

Relationships are both joyful privilege and serious responsibility. We encourage and support one another as we strive to be responsible, loving people. We also recognize that conflict is inevitable in any relationship, but believe that when addressed with open hearts, it can lead to greater understanding. Therefore, when resolving differences, we value assertiveness, active listening and empathetic

response. In times of broken trust, we seek mutual understanding, forgiveness and healing.

We embrace a vision of peace and social justice for people of all races, ethnicities, abilities, socioeconomic situations, gender identities and sexual orientations.

We identify and resist injustice in all forms and we strive to create, support and celebrate conditions that promote equity, dignity and community.

- West Hill United Church, *VisionWorks 2015*

The very act of discarding outworn beliefs, far from demonstrating a lack of faith, may ... open the door for genuine faith to operate ... Indeed, the modern atheist who rejects the notion of God in the interests of truth may be manifesting more faith than the traditional theist. The assertion that one needs to believe a particular creed or set of doctrines in order to have faith is an invitation not to faith but to credulity.

Doubt is not the enemy of faith but its ally, as the enemy of false beliefs. All beliefs should be continually subjected to doubt and critical examination and, when found to be false or inadequate, they should be discarded.

- Lloyd Geering, *Christianity without God* (2002), p. 16, 24-26

[T]he Christian churches of today face an unknown future, and are strongly tempted to turn back to past tradition and raise up Christian orthodoxy and its various symbolic terms into objective idols that must be preserved and worshipped at all cost in the hope that they will bring deliverance ... Only when the church and its theologians are prepared to acknowledge and abandon their own idols are they in a position to point out the idols in society.

- Lloyd Geering, *Reimagining God: The Faith Journey of a Modern Heretic* (2014), p. 166

What I have tried to say, in a tentative and exploratory way, may seem to be radical, and doubtless to many heretical. The one thing of which I am fairly sure is that, in retrospect, it will be seen to have erred in not being nearly radical enough.

- John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God*, 1963

N. Exercise of Ministry Subject to the Oversight and Discipline of The United Church of Canada

179. This I have always done and will continue to endeavour to do to the best of my ability and the extent of the privilege extended to me to do so.

ALL OF WHICH IS RESPECTFULLY SUBMITTED

Signed at Toronto, this 17th day of June 2016



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APPENDIX A

Bay of Quinte Conference Service

*Questions Asked At The Bay Of Quinte Conference Service Of Praise Ordination/Commissioning
And Convenating*

June 6th, 1993, Wesley United Church, Pembroke, ON

Presider: Within the ministry of the whole people of God, you are called to a ministry of Word and Sacrament and Pastoral Care. You are to exercise your ministry in accordance with the scriptures and in continuity with the faith of the Church. With God's people, you are to discern the needs, concerns and hopes of the world and proclaim by word and deed the justice of God's reign.

You are to love and service the people among whom you work, caring alike for young and old, strong and weak, rich and poor.

You are to teach and preach, to declare God's judgment and forgiveness and announce God's blessing in the assembly of the people, to lead in prayer and preside at the font of baptism and at the table of the Lord.

You are to nourish, and be nourished by Christ's people from the riches of God's grace and, together with them, to glorify God in this life and in the life to come.

I ask you therefore, do you believe in God who created and is creating, who has come in Jesus, the Word made flesh, to reconcile and make new, and who works in us and others by the Holy Spirit?

Candidates: I do.

Presider: Do you believe that God is calling you to the ordained ministry of Word, Sacrament and Pastoral Care and do you accept this call?

Candidates: I do.

Presider: Will you, with Christ's people, be faithful in prayer and in the study of scripture, that you may know the mind of Christ?

Candidates: I will.

Presider: Will you endeavor to teach and preach the Word of God and to administer the sacraments, that the reconciling love of Christ may be known and received?

Candidates: I will.

Presider: Will you be faithful in the pastoral care of all whom you are called to serve, laboring together with them to build up the household of God?

Candidates: I will

Presider: Are you willing to exercise your ministry in accordance with the scriptures, in continuity with the faith of the Church, and subject to the oversight and discipline of the United Church of Canada (*sic*)?

Candidates: I will

Presider: May God, who has given you the will to do these things, give you the grace and power to perform them.

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CANDIDATE: I do.

PRESIDER: Will you, with Christ's people, be faithful in prayer and in the study of scripture, that you may know the mind of Christ?

CANDIDATE: I will.

PRESIDER: Will you endeavour to teach and preach the Word of God, that the reconciling love of Christ may be known and received?

CANDIDATE: I will.

PRESIDER: Will you be faithful in the pastoral care of all whom you are called to serve, labouring together with them to build up the household of God?

CANDIDATE: I will.

PRESIDER: Are you willing to exercise your ministry in accordance with the scriptures, in continuity with the faith of the Church, and subject to the oversight and discipline of the United Church of Canada?

CANDIDATE: I will.

PRESIDER: May God, who has given you the will to do these things, give you the grace and power to perform them.

PEOPLE: AMEN

(The Candidate for Commissioning is seated)

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ORDINATION STATEMENT AND QUESTIONS

(Candidates for Ordination stand)

PRESIDER: Within the ministry of the whole people of God, you are called to a ministry of Word and Sacrament and Pastoral Care.

You are to exercise your ministry in accordance with the scriptures and in continuity with the faith of the Church. With God's people, you are to discern the needs, concerns and hopes of the world and proclaim by word and deed the justice of God's reign.

You are to love and serve the people among whom you work, caring alike for young and old, strong and weak, rich and poor.

You are to teach and preach, to declare God's judgment and forgiveness and announce God's blessing in the assembly of the people, to lead in prayer and preside at the font of baptism and at the table of the Lord.

You are to nourish, and be nourished by Christ's people from the riches of God's grace and, together with them, to glorify God in this life and in the life to come.

I ask you therefore, do you believe in God who created and is creating, who has come in Jesus, the Word made flesh, to reconcile and make new, and who works in us and others by the Holy Spirit?

CANDIDATES: I do.

PRESIDER: Do you believe that God is calling you to the ordained ministry of Word, Sacrament and Pastoral Care and do you accept this call?

CANDIDATES: I do.

- 10 -

PRESIDER: Will you, with Christ's people, be faithful in prayer and in the study of scripture, that you may know the mind of Christ?

CANDIDATES: I will.

PRESIDER: Will you endeavour to teach and preach the Word of God and to administer the sacraments, that the reconciling love of Christ may be known and received?

CANDIDATES: I will.

PRESIDER: Will you be faithful in the pastoral care of all whom you are called to serve, labouring together with them to build up the household of God?

CANDIDATES: I will.

PRESIDER: Are you willing to exercise your ministry in accordance with the scriptures, in continuity with the faith of the Church, and subject to the oversight and discipline of the United Church of Canada?

CANDIDATES: I will.

PRESIDER: May God, who has given you the will to do these things, give you the grace and power to perform them.

(The Candidates for Ordination are seated)

INVITATION TO PRAYER

PRESIDER: Sisters and brothers, let us pray for the outpouring of spiritual gifts upon these servants whom God has chosen for these ministries.

(The people pray in silence)

- 11 -

PRAYER RESPONSE: Send Your Holy Spirit (3 times)
(pg. 23 - The Sampler)

Send your Ho - ly Spir - it, send your Ho - ly Spir - it,
God of love and lis - ten - ing hear our hum - ble prayer

COMMISSIONING/ORDINATION PRAYER:
(All Candidates for Commissioning/Ordination stand)

PRESIDER: Let us pray.

Praise to your holy name, O God.
You have named us as your own,
and called us into covenant with you.

Holy is your name, O God.

Praise to your holy name, O God.
You gathered a covenant people for yourself,
and named the house of Aaron to minister in your presence.
You raised up all the company of the prophets
to declare your Word and to speak for the voiceless.

APPENDIX B

West Hill Study Session (2003)

BIBLE, GOD, JESUS

The following are outlines of three study sessions used in 2003 as the congregation was beginning the process of writing a statement of faith. That piece of writing, called VisionWorks, was written and accepted by the congregation in 2004 after the writing group determined that writing a statement of faith was an act of division. They chose instead to write a document stating the values by which we, as a congregation, chose to live.

Session one, August 20—The Bible

Have available:

Throckmorton's Gospel Parallels

Concordance

Zondervan Parallel New Testament

Five Gospels

Bible Timechart

Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism, Spong

Copies of Worksheet #2

Copies of Russell's Bible History

Copies of "Who is God?" and "Recovering the Bible's Lost Female Imagery"

Have Process for Bible Study on Flip Chart

Favourite Story or Passage

Write it out as clearly as you remember it

Find it in Bible using Concordance

If in Hebrew Scriptures: Find it on Bible Time Chart and two translations—Tanakh and one other.

If in Gospels: Find it in Throckmorton's Gospel Parallels or Five Gospels.

If in Epistles/Revelation: Find it in Zondervan Parallel New Testament.

Compare different versions—identify whether you are looking at different versions of the same story (parallels in gospels/epistles) or

different translations (Zondervan/Tanakh, etc.) Which most closely resembles your memory of the passage/story?

Report back

Copies of Chapter 4 Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism

Copies of Intro to Genesis from Liberty Bible Commentary

Copies of Introduction to The Other Bible

7:30 Open with Prayer, scripture passage or meditation

Introductions

7:45 Personal Reflection—Divide life into 3 Segments.

What was secular life like in each? What was faith life like in each? Share with neighbour. Any similarities?

8:00 Have participants identify a favourite or most interesting passage or story in the bible. Write it out as closely as they can remember it.

Use concordance to identify which book of the bible the story/passage is in.

Group according to where the story/passage is from and provide with following instructions.

Hebrew Scriptures—locate when the book was written on the Bible Chart.

Gospels—locate the story in Throckmorton and/or The Five Gospels.

Epistles—locate the story/passage in the Zondervan Gospel Parallels and compare the text in each translation. Which one most closely reflects what you think of when you recall the story/passage from memory?

8:30 Report back findings.

8:45 Basic Bible History—Hand out Worksheet # 2 Periods of Biblical History.

Identify main sources of Biblical narrative. Yahwist, Elohist, Deuteronomic and Priestly. Some theories of New Testament writing. Have available copies of Chapter 4 of Spong's Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalists, the Forward to Genesis from Liberty Commentary, and the introduction to The Other Bible.

9:15 Ask participants to use the themes/message from the bible passage or story they chose and write a story to recapture those themes in contemporary words and images—not just rewriting, but creating a new story or passage which holds the same themes as the biblical one. This writing will be shared next time.

9:20 Ask for any further questions which may need to be addressed.

Hand out "Who is God?" reading for next week.

Close with prayer.

Session Two: God

Preparation:

List of Bible passages on Flipchart from AQ/Ex book, pg. 14

Markers

Flip chart for “God is like...”

Selection of pictures – “Images of God”

Copies of reading #3 “Jesus, the Christ”

7:30 Open with prayer

7:35 Any new introductions need to be made.

GROUP OPENER—What is the smallest space you have ever lived in—

What was it like?

7:45 Presentation of written work from previous week’s assignment.

What was the process like for them?

8:00 Review comments on “Who is God?” and “Recovering the Bible’s Lost Female Imagery” readings. Note insights on FlipChart.

8:10 Have bible passages from list on page 14 of Asking Questions, Exploring Faith listed on newsprint. (Don’t list corresponding images.) Hand out bibles. Have participant’s research the list (3or 4 per person) and write on the newsprint what the image was.

Which one is most meaningful for each of the participants.

8:25 Continue to explore concept with following: Write at top of page “God is ...” “God is like...” Ask participants to finish sentences and then discuss their statements.

8:45 Have several pictures/picture books prepared for participants to look at.

(Cover up any writing indicating what the picture means/is/symbolizes.) Ask them which picture best represents their experience of God. They can pick more than one picture. Have them write in journals their reactions. They will not need to read these to the group if they do not wish.

9:00 Have participants share verbally which picture(s) they chose and why— they do not have to read what they wrote down.

9:15 Review of evening’s discoveries, if any. (May include discussion here about naïve realism/critical realism/ non-realism) Ask if there are any questions remaining that need to be addressed.

9:25 Ask participants what their favourite chorus tune is, if they can think of

it. Tell them to write a hymn to that tune for next week which is about either this week's topic, God, or next week's, Jesus, the Christ.

Hand out reading #3 About Jesus, the Christ.

9:25 Close with prayer.

Session Three: Jesus, the Christ

7:30 Open with Prayer, meditation, or Scripture

7:35 Group check-in—stepping aside to be here. What have you left on the road in order to be present, fully -present tonight.

7:45 Share hymns written after last week.

8:15 Two Groups—Have one picking **names** which most speak to them of The Christ and **pictures** which most speak to them of Jesus. Have the other group picking out which **picture** most speaks to them of Jesus and which **name** speaks most to them of The Christ. Write about the differences in their journals.

8:30 Discuss the differences they have noted.

8:45 Read a variety of creeds about Jesus Christ—Apostles, Nicene, United Church, Spong's latest, Basis of Union, Colossians 1:15-20 and have participants reflect on which they most accept and which they most reject.

9:20 Have participant's each name one thing, word, phrase, etc., which would have to be in a statement of faith they were making about Jesus. List them on newsprint.

9:30 Close with prayer—Give out next week's assignment—Write a statement of faith about Jesus including the words and phrases listed by the participant's or at least the concepts they embrace. Expect to share these at the next meeting. Hand out reading "Why pain and suffering?" Ask participants to reflect on those times they have called out Why or Why me? And journal on it. These writings will not need to be shared.

Please view the pictures and the titles. Pick one picture which most reflects your understanding of Jesus. Pick one title which most reflects your understanding of the Christ.

Please view the pictures and the titles. Pick one title which most reflects your understanding of Jesus. Pick one picture which most reflects your understanding of the Christ.

APPENDIX C

Faith Talk: Toward A New Statement Of Faith (2004)

The following is the response prepared by members of the congregation of West Hill United Church to the Theology and Faith Committee's Faith Talk Study program initiated to engage congregations of the United Church in the work of writing a new statement of faith for the twenty-first century.

Submitted by members of
West Hill United Church,
62 Orchard Park Drive,
Toronto, ON M1E 3T7

The following represent the responses given to the specific questions asked by the Committee on Theology and Faith. They were collected over a four-week study session held during March and early April.

We also include the Principles of the Unitarian Universalists which received much support within the study group as well as the position statements of The Centre for Progressive Christianity, www.tpc.org, which are being studied by the congregation for possible adoption at a later date.

Further, we attach a copy of a document entitled Theological Reflection which was prepared for use by the Faith Talk study group and developed from the concepts outlined in the book *The Mouth of the Dragon* by Susan Adams and John Salmon. We wish to suggest that the Committee on Theology and Faith consider adopting such a document to be provided with any new or old statement of faith or belief in order to assist any who approach such issues of faith and belief with tools with which to assess them critically.

Current Context

- Stewardship – dominion over – stewardship of
- 40 years of fossil fuels left
- Extinction of species of animals and plants
- Increased awareness our interdependence with our environment
- Acknowledgement of our multi-faith community
- New understandings of mission work
- Secular Humanism
- WWW – access to the world
- Globalization
- Scientific advances – cloning – ethical dilemmas
- Gap between rich and poor growing wider
- Unequal distribution of world resources
- We are one bad bug away from extinction
- Change from God should save us to Science should save us

Context

What images, concepts, beliefs and practices most sustain your faith?

- Worship, involvement in church life; *frame of reference that allows belief to shift; accepts doubts as part of faith*; walking and meditation
- Creator of universe, concept of Holy Spirit, Guide Me, of Thou Great Jehovah, God as a guide, God sustains us in times of trouble but doesn't cause it, singing, prayer, study groups
- Finding inner peace within yourself, reading Bible
- We are all called to be the "church", we are the hands and feet of Christ; communion
- We need to consider: *personal faith stories, scripture in relevant and current interpretations, congregational involvement in worship, inclusion of other faith theologies and other-than minister led reflection, new music and instruments, inclusive language.*

What is happening in the world that might shake your faith? the faith of your congregation? the faith of others around you?

- Continual upheaval; war; forces of evil at work in the world etc.
- Society's views on religion; rampant consumerism; multi-faith nature of society; disease

In what ways are these issues calling into question your understanding of God, Jesus, the Trinity, sacraments, ministry, and the church?

- When bad things happen to good people – is God not the protector we thought?
Increasing secularisation of society makes it difficult to hold onto faith
- Trinity understood to be a model and idea now rather than a reality; seeing Jesus as a role-model or doorway into God rather than the only divine human – that it is rather a matter of degree than substance
- *Resurrection could be inside the follower of Jesus*
- *Call to follow Jesus so much more important than what we believe about him*
- *What we believe may not be that important*
- *The sacraments are symbolic only – clergy not necessary to access God's grace*

Are there theological principles from particular scriptural traditions (e.g. creation, the wilderness wandering of the people of Israel, the exile in Babylon) that give guidance to our current situation?

- John 14:1-2 "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places" and 1 Corinthians 12:12-13 "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit." Body image, many parts to the same body – ideas of unity with all
- Loaves and fishes symbolic of what one person can do, that might be our only hope

Church

What relationship might there be between church and salvation?

- Salvation – Latin root health – wholeness – tied to the concept of wholeness
- Used to understand as Christ as personal saviour and would have a “spot” reserved. Subsequently – that’s the foundation for thinking of salvation. Although saved as a child and understand that, it is still not as easy to understand as an adult.
- Unbrokenness – that the relationship we have with God is unbroken
- Although our relationship to God is never broken – we can live in ways in which we are not in right relationship. Living outside of right relationship with God is to experience “hell”
- In Reformed Traditions: The church would offer opportunities for salvation and teach the requirements for salvation
- If the view of salvation is unbrokenness, then the church is to help us in connecting with and searching for the divine.
- A way of focussing us through ritual, singing, prayer and spiritual discipline
- An opportunity to give deep thought to these things
- Enables us to see God more readily in the everyday.
- Celebration of faiths – celebrating the we are and can be in right relationship also known as saved
- Church as practice for the rest of life.

a) Can we as Christians be open to other faiths? b) Does such openness threaten the integrity of our particular Christian beliefs? c) If we can be open, how do we do this?

- a) Emphatically yes. b) Emphatically no.
- c) The Golden Rule is a great way to live a life – Do Unto Others.

Ministry

What is or should be the relationship between designated ministries (ordained, diaconal, lay pastoral, student supply, etc.) and the laity?

- Your ministry is where world’s deep hunger and your deep gladness meet
- Ministry – facilitative: help us to think for ourselves and grow – not authoritative: tell what to think
- Trained, broader knowledge base, history of church and theology
- Contextualization of scripture – bringing into current context
- Minister and laity can be: teacher, guide, interpreter, comedian, orator, mentor, pastoral, illuminator – there is a reciprocity of roles

How is the role of a designated ministry different from that of the ministry of the whole people of God (that is, everyone)?

- Only by degree
-

Sacraments

Do you think that there would be occasions when it would be appropriate for people other than the ordained, diaconal or otherwise licensed minister to administer the sacraments?

- As long as the person is aware/educated on all aspects of the sacrament, we would feel comfortable having them administer the sacraments. We would like to be reassured if they aren't one of the usual ministers of that. Also for their minds and hearts should be in the right space – it doesn't take an ordained minister to do that. We would like them to be aware that the baptism or communion is important and to try and connect with the people they are serving.
- Communion can be anytime.
- Congregation may require that ministerial staff preside at sacraments but more for reasons of position I.E. decorum than right and privilege.
- Baptism should be done by the minister but for the same reasons of decorum rather than special dispensation of grace.

How do the sacraments proclaim our theology?

- For baptism – being born anew into the fellowship of believers – vows taken on behalf of the child with the hope that later the child will confirm these vows as an adult of the congregation
- The parent accepting the role of bringing the child to church and introducing them to a life of faith
- Baptism is a rite of initiation – initial invitation to the regular refocusing of the church
- Being born into a new understanding of community and one's unbroken relationship with God
- Each Baptism is an opportunity for a personal renewal of faith.
- Communion: all are welcome at our table because Christ ate with everyone – it should be inclusive
- It is symbolic of responding to the call from Jesus – by coming to the table we are accepting the invitation to come and follow Jesus
- Serving each other the elements is symbolic of our ministering to each other. God has no hands but our hands. Recognizing Christ in each other – acting as Christ as we serve.
- We refer to One Body – we do something completely together and when we do we feel a deep connection with each other.
- Communion reminds us to see the holy in the everyday.

How do you relate the sacraments to your understanding of God?

- See answers above.

Other

What other questions do you have that you would like the Statement of Faith to address?

- Prayer – recognizing recent scientific support for the efficacy of prayer – should our statement include an understanding of prayer – one that is consistent with our uncertainty regarding an interventionist God.
- Please use non-gender specific language

Historical and Contemporary Considerations

Are there elements of the historic expressions of faith that you would like to see considered?

Are there elements of contemporary expressions that you would like to see included?

- A New Creed – has lots of room for a variety of interpretations – expresses hope more than certainty and it is poetic – it reads out loud beautifully.
- Need to assert that we are not alone. Recognizing that not being alone may mean that there is no separate deity out there, but, in the face of that, we recognize we are not alone, we have each other and the values and grace with which we live together.

Are there fresh concepts that you would like to offer for our consideration?

- Emphasis on respectful treatment of our planet, environment, fellow creatures with a view to preservation and conservation rather than extinction and wastefulness
- A template or rubric for theological examination of faith and belief might stand the test of time better than trying to articulate exact statements
- The supreme witness of faith is ethical living.

Are there guiding theological principles from our understanding of scriptural traditions (e.g. creation, the wilderness wandering of the people of Israel, the exile in Babylon) that you find pertinent?

- God of Hebrew Scriptures is no longer relevant. God of the Second Scriptures provides choice rather than laying out a list of requisites. Noted the similarities to the 1940 vs. 1995 creeds – one would seem to provide requisites the other offers choices.
- Hebrew Scriptures though filled with some beautiful stuff, need too much (or just much) contextualization
- Ecclesiastes and Proverbs offer much down to earth advice and are excellent references for self-improvement.

Style and Format

How would you imagine using a Statement of Faith?

- Needs the permission to interpret/adapt that we currently have in A New Creed
- Needs to be a vibrant, living document
- Would be good to include pertinent excerpts in worship to promote familiarity
- Include a concise synopsis in special services i.e. baptism and communion
- Short and pithy enough to go onto the back of the bulletin/order of service
- If we spell things out, it needs to be able to be used in open ways – not authoritative
- Inclusive, non-gender specific language needs to be used.

Is there a particular format that you would find most useful? Some suggestions we are currently working with are

- a summary for easy reference or liturgical use
- availability on the Web with hypertext
- graphics and pictures

- appendices of historic documents and biblical references
- See above

What else would you like to tell the Committee on Theology and Faith?

- Focus on guidelines to enhance our quality of life on earth.
- Things we stand for that should be acknowledged (somewhere)
 - That we are focussed on social justice
 - That we are inclusive to a spectrum of interpretations of Christian faith – (recognizing that the word Christian must have a broad and inclusive connotation) and a recognition that we are respectful of other faith traditions
 - Philosophy of the table should be known – that our table is open
 - Many of our clergy are women
 - Stance toward developing affirming congregations.

Who We Are:

West Hill United Church
Toronto Scarborough Presbytery
Toronto Conference

Urban/suburban congregation

This is not the response of the session or its equivalent, but would closely match their position.

It is the response of a group of interested individuals.

There were eight in the study group. The numbers were lower than anticipated due, in part, to the 35 people regularly attending a 10 evening study group on John Spong's, *A New Christianity for a New World*. Twenty-eight of those individuals attended a two-day session held with Bishop Spong earlier this month. The responses of the Faith Talk group reflect the progressive direction that the congregation is taking, a direction taken with much study, reflection and faith.

Age of participants: 21-30, 31-45 and 46-60

Number of study sessions: 4

Number of hours in study: 12, not including personal reflection and journaling required of participants in preparation for each session.

The study document and process on the whole were helpful.

Members of the study group anticipated grappling with each of the articles of faith, a feat that would have been beyond the scope of the study, but which may yet be undertaken out of pure interest.

Issues of Importance that emerged for us.

We see ourselves as a very progressive congregation theologically. Studying the Statement of Faith written in 1940 would, no doubt, be a real eye-opener for most of the members of the congregation, many of whom would be shocked to see the conservative faith positions articulated there. When asked during a recent sermon how many had read it, one admitted to locating the page on the internet and another to printing it out, but neither had actually read it at all. There were about 160 in worship that day.

Basically, Statements of Faith are not an issue for most of the membership. The values by which we live in community and the need to constantly seek to be in right relationship with each other are much more important issues to the individuals who worship with us. It is more important to us that we be able to grapple with the dynamic nature of faith than hammer it out in gold leaf.

As we move to articulate our faith, it is hoped that the denomination that grew out of such diversity will continue to prod us into the many new understandings available to us because of awareness of and respect for the myriad cultures/faith groups with whom we share this blue orb. We wish you well.

Dorothy Crawford
Peggy Hall
Kathy McWatters
Holly Petersen
Heather Urbansky
Gretta Vosper
Marg Wood
Leslie Wright

The attached documents were reviewed by the study group

The following principles found much support within the study group.

Principles of the Canadian Unitarian Council

We, the member congregations of the Canadian Unitarian Council, covenant to affirm and promote:

- the inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- justice, equity, and compassion in human relations;
- acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- a free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

The following position statements, or eight points, as they are known, of The Center for Progressive Christianity of the United States are being studied by the West Hill Congregation during the months of May and June. They will be studied in conjunction with the *Asking Questions, Exploring Faith* study that we regularly undertake with newcomers. It is hoped that the position outlined herein, or similar principles, will be embraced by the congregation at a later date.

The Center for Progressive Christianity

By calling ourselves progressive we mean that we are Christians who:

- Have found an approach to God through the life and teachings of Jesus.
- Recognize the faithfulness of other people who have other names for the way to God's realm, and acknowledge that their ways are true for them, as our ways are true for us
- Understand the sharing of bread and wine in Jesus's name to be a representation of an ancient vision of God's feast for all peoples,
- Invite all people to participate in our community and worship life without insisting that they become like us in order to be acceptable (including but not limited to):
 believers and agnostics,
 conventional Christians and questioning skeptics,
 women and men,
 those of all sexual orientations and gender identities,
 those of all races and cultures,
 those of all classes and abilities,
 those who hope for a better world and those who have lost hope
- Know that the way we behave toward one another and toward other people is the fullest expression of what we believe.
- Find more grace in the search for understanding than we do in dogmatic certainty - more value in questioning than in absolutes;
- Form ourselves into communities dedicated to equipping one another for the work we feel called to do: striving for peace and justice among all people, protecting and restoring the integrity of all God's creation, and bringing hope to those Jesus called the least of his sisters and brothers
- Recognize that being followers of Jesus is costly, and entails selfless love, conscientious resistance to evil, and renunciation of privilege.

APPENDIX D

Rev. Vosper's Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity Speech (2004)

IT'S TIME (2004)

The text below is the speech given by me at the launch of the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity in November, 2004

It's Time

We come to this moment in time, called by a very long list of voices, and it has been many, many years, decades, even centuries, that those voices have been calling us. We have been urged here by those who have been examining scripture for years and finding that its origins, together with the contradictions and repetitions within it must explain it as the construction of human minds, the work of human hands. We have been called here by those who noted that the defence of a document's truth cannot be found exclusively within itself. We have been called by those who have sifted through the sands of the Middle East, eager to find some kind of proof for the burden of both testaments, and finding, once those sands have filtered through their fingers, few grains of fact remaining. We have been called by those whose questions about the nature of reality we could not answer or, if we could, our answers held no meaning for them. We have been called by those who have found too many of the Bible's moral messages, in the light of the call to love one's neighbour, worse than irrelevant, but actually life denying. We have been called by those who were excommunicated from the established church for thinking outside the church's interpretation of faith, for daring to confront, to argue, to think daringly, and to act bravely. We have been called by those who, outside of our version of Christian legitimacy, have still lived out the values of love and justice, compassion and forgiveness. We have been called time and again to meet their challenges, and even when we have listened, too often we have shied away.

Listen to this particular call:

"I suspect that we stand on the brink of a period in which it is going to become increasingly difficult to know what the true defence of Christian truth requires. There are always those ... who see the best, and indeed the only, defence of doctrine to lie in the firm reiteration, in fresh and intelligent contemporary language, of "the faith once delivered to the saints." And the Church has not lacked in recent years' theologians and apologists who have given themselves to this task. Their work has been rewarded by a hungry following, and there will always be need of more of them. Nothing that I go on to say should be taken to deny their indispensable vocation.

"At the same time, I believe we are being called, over the years ahead, to far more than a restating of traditional orthodoxy in modern terms. Indeed, if our defence of the Faith is limited to this, we shall find in all likelihood that we have lost out to all but a tiny religious remnant. A much more radical recasting, I would judge, is demanded, in the process of which the most fundamental categories of our theology – of God, of the supernatural, and of religion itself – must go into the melting. Indeed, though we shall not of course be able to do it, I can at least understand what those mean who urge that we should do well to give up using the word "God" for a generation, so

impregnated has it become with a way of thinking we may have to discard it if the Gospel is to signify anything.”

These words were penned in 1962 as the preface for the small but enormously provocative book, *Honest to God*, by John A. T. Robinson. Robinson was the Bishop of Woolwich in South London when he wrote his book, provoked by the ideas of Paul Tillich. Robinson’s words came as freshness upon a bleak and sterile ecclesial back-drop to the many who wished to see his challenge accepted by the church – those passionate about what the church might be and what it could do in a world filled with conflict and strife. He was vilified for his vision and his challenge to organized Christianity. Yet he ended the preface of his ground-breaking book with this line:

“The one thing of which I am fairly sure is that, in retrospect, [my words] will be seen to have erred in not being nearly radical enough.”

And, those heartened by Robinson, too, have called to us and continue to do so.

Robert Funk founded the Westar Institute in 1986, as an advocate for religious literacy. It flung wide the doors of academia so that the public could access the quest for the historical Jesus, trying to discover who the man really was who is said to have started all this and what he might have been really been intending to do. That quest has been engaged in by scholars such as John Dominique Crossan, Marcus Borg, and Karen Armstrong.

Others have sought to understand our faith from a different perspective. They have called to us to consider that the concept of Kristos, a rich and deep expression of the longing for a just and peace-filled world, existed long before it was embedded in the stories of the life of a man remembered as Jesus of Nazareth. The works of Godfrey Higgins, Gerald Massey and Alvin Boyd Kuhn, recently remembered to us by Tom Harpur, and those of Susan Adams and John Salmon, these works, these voices, too, call us to this place today.

Brian Swimme and Matthew Fox, for over twenty years, have been calling us to cast aside ecclesial depictions of life as a debased and transitory journey toward everlasting pleasures or tortures, and to see creation, including our human bodies, as a thing of wonder and beauty. Carter Heyward opens our eyes to equity issues and calls our hearts to recognize that it is God lurching in our stomachs when injustice causes us despair and rage.

Richard Holloway, former Bishop of Edinburgh, argues that human thinking influences our understanding of God, and therefore even the original writers of Scripture. His book, *Doubts and Loves*, proposes that the ordination of women picked at the fabric of biblical inerrancy and was perhaps what pulled out that first stitch, thus beginning the unravelling of that previously perfect, seamless garment.

In 2002, Andrew Furlong, a priest in Ireland, came before an ancient tradition, in the form of a heresy trial, for making this same call to us. His resignation, personal preservation from a frightened church, is also a call to us.

Don Cuppitt has bravely and profoundly called to us from many points in his developing understanding of religion, challenging us to make dramatic but deeply liberating and healing changes in our concepts, our wording, our practices. Lloyd Geering, even into his late 80’s

continues to provoke us with his insights into the development of Christianity and the world in which we live, calling for honest, open scholarship. Calls to integrity come from James Barr, David Boulton, Burton Mack, John Cobb and many others.

Jim Adams, throughout his ministry at St. Mark's Episcopal Church on Capital Hill in Washington, brought practical reality to the words being penned by scholars, building the faith community on progressive principles of Christianity. And Bishop John Shelby Spong, first recipient of the Westar Institute's "John A. T. Robinson Award" for his unrelenting honesty in both spoken and written word, in the face of the massively difficult ecclesial and social issues presented to the church, continues his call to us this evening.

Over forty years of scholarship and argument later, we cannot shrink from Robinson's vision. We, too, must look at it directly and rise to his challenge, recasting our understanding of Christianity, examining the structures that have supported it, clearing away those things that would keep us from seeing it clearly; for it's time to step more and more boldly into the realities of this world as we experience them, to open ourselves to an honest critique of our Christian heritage, and to expose ourselves to the light of new understandings that so many have placed before us. It's time.

We see all human beings as having a spiritual dimension to their lives. And it is within that dimension that we interact with that which we would call the Spirit, the Ground of all Being, the Divine. When we have constructed dogma about the divine and created rituals with which to relate to it, we have called it "religion." Religion seems to be mandated by our peculiar human need to make sense of our world. And so we construct our institutions and traditions, for our time, and according to beliefs, as we understand them. But it does not and cannot stand that one generation's idea of the appropriate approach to their particular concept of the Divine must hold for the next generation. Just as every other field of knowledge and wisdom has changed as we have learned, our faith communities have not only the freedom, but the supremely important responsibility to work at our message and our expression of it – to align and realign it with the best, the highest, the healthiest vision we can develop of the sacredness of life, the sacredness of community. We, too, must take up that task and work to create a world in which each person's right to find their own way is honoured, whether it involves ancient or contemporary rituals or traditions, religious or secular means, and we challenge ourselves to be open to new understandings of the Divine as they are made known to us.

The Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity has been created to help us, you and me, meet the challenges that our world presents us.

For generations, working within the confines of traditional Christianity, whether as lay leaders or as ordered ministry personnel, has meant operating in a language of faith that grew out of beautifully rich belief system – a religion known and celebrated through millennia. The exquisite nature of that language of faith, be it music, prayer, imagery, ritual, art, has brought untold comfort and security to a vast host of believers. For that reason, it has become very powerful.

However, there exists another vast host of people who searched for meaning in the midst of a chaotic world, who struggled, but failed to embrace the things Christian authorities called "truth," for whom healing and a truth they can embrace may yet be distant from them. For these people,

the view of history held by the church and the language that was intended to bring stability, beauty, and understanding, has been a strong and inviolable barrier to Christianity and its communities of faith. Even though we on the inside may have derived a certain amount of comfort in glossing over discrepancies, sticking with familiar, if no-longer-believed statements of faith, and trying to explain the peculiar words and requirements to newcomers – I believe, it is no longer helpful or healthful for us to continue to do so. If we are to be an influence for good, for comfort, for strength, for growth, we must use the language of those who come to us, not require that they come to understand ours. It's time.

I am not talking about calling the sanctuary “the Celebration Room” or the narthex “the lobby.” I'm not talking just about inclusive language. I'm referring to letting go of words and statements and concepts that reiterate dogma we do not any longer, or maybe never did truly believe ourselves, let alone require that others do so. I'm referring to a conscientious clearing of the house of faith of language that suggests salvation from hell in return for a belief in the sacrifice of Jesus for our sins. I'm talking about being willing to give up singing hymns – no matter how dear to our hearts – that reiterate that bargain and celebrate Christianity's march across the world, bringing light to all the nations. I'm urging us to carefully, reverently, stop referring to God as someone who directs or does not direct us, grants or does not grant our requests, saves or does not save a loved one from harm for reasons he or she may choose but that we, most certainly will not understand, yet must accept as evidence of God's wisdom, power, and love. And I'm suggesting that we boldly, comfortably, write our own sacred wisdom, gleaned from Scripture all that is life-enhancing, but none that is not – and stretching ourselves to discover new expressions of the Spirit, new challenges to our community. We need to be ruthlessly honest, to state who we are, what we believe or don't, what we don't yet understand, and work together to discover new ways to find meaning in the world, new strength to engage its too inhumane systems, new joy in the experience that we call life.

We have much on which to build. We hold deeply sacred beliefs about the value of life. We hold deeply sacred beliefs about the value of community. We hold deeply sacred beliefs about our responsibility for each other. None of these will be left behind. And if, for some of us, this talk is still about stepping into the unknown, then I believe we will find, as Overton says, that there will be ground beneath our feet or we will have wings to fly. It's time.

Over the course of the next few months, and years, we hope to be able to provide, through our website and, perhaps, publications, accessible tools for use in study, worship and community leadership. We hope to inspire congregational leaders to let go of their traditional liturgy, or traditional liturgy restated in post-modern language, and to reach within themselves to the core of their being from which can well up incredibly rich and fresh language, imagery, poetry, music. It will not be easy – many of us have become numb to our own creative instincts – but it is an essential one.

There are so many points in our lives that touch the spiritual realm. We look to the spiritual to gain strength, to evaluate our lives and refocus on those things we want to place at the centre of them as important, to recognize and give thanks for those who have touched us and brought clarity or peace to our souls, to reconnect with that which is precious to us-to name it sacred, holy. I speak of birth, coming of age, declarations of love and commitment, the changes inherent in the passing

of years, the end of life, as we know it. We hope to be able to provide resources that will add to those points in ways that dignify our common search and celebrate life's holy moments.

And we hope to offer study resources and ideas for those of you who may yet, for some time, search for and not find, communities of faith that speak a language that is open to your thought, your spiritual quest, your experience of the Divine. Those resources will encourage critical thinking, the gathering together of groups and the formation of communities that can engage in conversation about the big things, issues that matter-values, meaning, relationships-the things we call "of the Spirit."

In many communities of faith, the guiding light has been some form of church authority, based on literal or metaphorical Scripture, accepted traditional formulas, or official pronouncements. May we now look to the only light that can guide us into the freedom of faith and the privilege of responsibility – the truth revealed to us in the light of love. May we see and know that spirit within us, may it shine forth in us, and from us.

(Solo: "The Light of Love" by Scott Kearns, 2004)

There is purpose to our work. Our world calls us to it. The earth, so filled with beauty, with gifts of peace and delight, is also filled with misery, with violence, with a futile busyness that steals our time to feel and to care. Were we to look, we would find in every corner, even in our own homes, places where love is needed in much, much greater quantities than it is ever found.

If we are convinced of the profound significance of each person as an infinitely precious being, and I believe that we can only be convinced of such a thing, we must then dream and plan and work toward positive change to enhance the well being of self, others, and the whole of creation – to be intentional about building love into all those corners of despair.

To encourage the ongoing search for understanding and relevance for our lives, both personal and communal, we will seek out and share resources that challenge us to think, to ask questions, to value spiritual insight. Reflection can be prompted through many means – contemporary and ancient, familiar and unfamiliar – art, music, nature, literature, and humanitarian effort.

Because we have a vision of peace that cannot be brought about through violence and strength but only justice and compassion, the communities we seek to support and build need to strive to identify and resist injustice in all the places of hurt in the world. This includes de-humanizing and oppressive conditions, structures, attitudes, messages, and ideas, even when those structures, those ideas have been our own. We must work to create, recognize, celebrate and support conditions that enhance equity, preserve dignity and respect individuality.

The life of faith is seen as a journey comprised of ever-new experiences and understandings of self, others, the world, and the divine. Everyone is on his or her own journey. They will make their own choices of resources, discover their own pace, and hold their own understandings of things spiritual. And though there may be times when we believe we are alone, this is not so, for we journey together in the spirit of divine love.

APPENDIX E

West Hill Study Session: Conversations On Faith (2005)

The following is a document from a study session held at West Hill in 2005. The first document “A Look at the Questions” was used as the sole tool for stimulating free-flowing discussion. The second document “A Look at the Questions: Accumulated Wisdom” is a summary of the conversation as it had been captured on flip chart sheets. I do not have a record of the source of the questions.

A Look at The Questions

Are the teachings attributed to Jesus less significant if we do not see him as the “son of God?”
 What happens when we die?
 What is the difference between Progressive Christianity and Unitarians?
 What is the definition of a Christian?
 Why celebrate Christmas, Easter—how does its meaning change?
 What is the place of Jesus in Progressive Christianity?
 When I pray in the Progressive Christian way—to what or who am I to direct my energy(ies)?
 Who do we pray to?
 Can God be thought of as a collective universal energy?
 Is the term God/Goddess still applicable in Progressive Christianity? or is this a universal energy force that we utilize to assist /direct us? e.g. pray?
 If Jesus Christ is not a mediator, how do we reconcile Progressive Christianity as being a Christian faith?
 How does Christ fit in, e.g., do we still call ourselves Christians if Christ was mythological?
 Why call ourselves Progressive Christians if Christ is no longer an important part of the equation?
 Why do we pray if we can’t expect our prayers to be answered?
 What does the Divine want from me?
 What exactly is the divine and how will I recognize it in myself/others?
 How do I know if I’m leading a life that is a positive to the universe?

A Look at The Questions: Collected Wisdom

Are the teachings attributed to Jesus less significant if we do not see him as the “son of God?”

In our conversations, I believe we determined that, no, they are no less significant if we do not see him as the “son of God.” For much of Christendom, Jesus’ teachings have been beside the point as the church focussed on his atoning sacrifice. An interest in his teachings as a human develop as that theology is set aside. Jesus teachings, and the teachings of any human that raise us to a deeper awareness of ourselves, our relationships and the living out of what is good have equal validity and worth.

What happens when we die?

I don’t know

What is the difference between Progressive Christianity and Unitarians?

Unitarianism grew out of the rejection of the belief that Jesus was divine. In that respect, a progressive perspective of Christianity brings us to the same conclusion. Both Unitarianism and progressive Christianity go beyond that original distinguishing belief now to wrestle with theistic and non-theistic images of God and deeper philosophical questions such as the creation of reality through language.

What is the definition of a Christian?

It depends on who you are. Each Christian denomination has a distinctive understanding of what constitutes a true Christian.

Why celebrate Christmas, Easter—how does its meaning change?

Christmas and Easter, freed from their literal understandings, become powerful metaphors for life. In the simplicity and hope of birth, that which we call sacred comes into existence in each of us despite all those reasons that life is not worth living and all those things that will seek to deny it. Through the Palm Sunday celebrations, we feel the urgent passion of hope, the belief that we can change the world and all the energy and delight that comes with that belief. But then the Passion story of Good Friday reminds us that we can lose everything, and even our most deeply felt commitments can be denied.

And then the final “but” brings us full circle, to the recognition that, despite the frustration of all our own personal attempts to be faithful to what we believe, there is a power for good that can overcome anything that has denied that goodness in the past. We believe in that hope. We have to.

What is the place of Jesus in Progressive Christianity?

As a teacher who, long ago, set out a way of living in right relationship that was radically different than what was experienced at the time.

The historical Jesus, stripped of divinity, calls us to live a radically inclusive love.

The Christos, stripped of humanity, calls us to live as those restored to their rightful places of dignity—a human dignity befitting those who are made in the image of the divine.

The Jesus of a progressive Christian perspective is a both/and Jesus

—no longer exalted, he challenges us to live in the manner in which he is depicted as having done *when he was living out values we now uphold*

—no longer locked to a time 2000 years ago, he challenges us to accept our role as co-creators of the world and to live responsibly aware of our interconnectivity with all of creation and, perhaps, with worlds of consciousness of which we are not yet aware.

And, we are freed to explore the amazing witnesses to both radically inclusive love and our interconnectivity that the world has known since Jesus. He originally set us on the course but no longer has to be *the* only guide.

When I pray in the Progressive Christian way—to what or who am I to direct my energy(ies)?
Who do we pray to?

To that which makes you stronger in your living out of the values you have committed to. If it is a being, then pray to a being. If it is your fellow humans, then pray with them before your face. The purpose of spiritual practice is not to get it right, but to engage ourselves on a higher level than that by which we live most of our lives, thereby attuning ourselves to that higher level living and challenging ourselves to be present to that more frequently.

Can God be thought of as a collective universal energy?

Absolutely, if that is helpful to you in your quest for spiritual development.

Is the term God/Goddess still applicable in Progressive Christianity? or is this a universal energy force that we utilize to assist /direct us? e.g. pray?

Both/and because either are terms/images/metaphors that can be helpful to different people. God/Goddess are very theistic, focussing on the being-ness of the divinity. While this is perhaps the easiest way for humans to visualize the concept of the sacred, it can be extremely limiting and often seduces us into projecting human characteristics such as jealousy and judgment upon whatever God might be. Ultimately, while we can experience its presence, we cannot define it.

If Jesus Christ is not a mediator, how do we reconcile Progressive Christianity as being a Christian faith?

The concept of a mediator is a theological concept developed through the writing of the gospels and the epistles and the development of the church. It is a concept that is, then, as fallible as any humanly created concept. Inasmuch as it is only required as a remedy to the theological construct of humanity as fallen and unworthy of accessing the divine, it is no longer necessary as a doctrine if we no longer see ourselves as fallen. Jesus' articulation of himself as mediator has been understood widely to have been placed in his mouth by those who were already expounding Christian theology. (See below...)

How does Christ fit in, e.g., do we still call ourselves Christians if Christ was mythological? Why call ourselves Progressive Christians if Christ is no longer an important part of the equation?

Christ: The concept of Christ, Christos, existed long before Jesus was ever given the title. It is understood as a powerful source of justice, restoration, a reminder that we are made in the image of the divine. It was a power that would restore Israel to its former glory. Whether or not one would like to see that happen would depend on whether or not that restoration was to an abusive power as demonstrated in much of the sacred texts or to a new kind of power. Early followers of the way saw it as a new kind of power. It came to rest upon Jesus as an embodiment of that new kind of power sometime after his death. Whether or not one believes in Jesus' historicity does not diminish, in the minds of those who would claim a Christos centred faith, the strength of the concept of Christos.

Christianity: The concept of a relevant religion requires that religious frameworks be able to respond to contemporary revelations available to them through science, hermeneutics, astronomy, medicine, anthropology, and post-modern interpretation. Had Christianity been able to be responsive to those revelations, it would have gently shifted to where we are now. We stand in the Christian tradition. Ultimately, the recognition that all religion is humanly constructed and not divinely ordained, will allow for conversations that, beyond religious prejudice and perspective, can work toward establishing peace, justice and right relationship with each ourselves, each other and the world.

Grounding ourselves in the Christian tradition bespeaks a resonance with the stories, taken metaphorically, of life, death, and new life.

We could, of course, call ourselves anything we like.

Why do we pray if we can't expect our prayers to be answered?

Prayer is a spiritual discipline that can change us. It may or may not be efficacious in the broad sense of magically altering the unfolding results of a situation; we cannot know. It can alter the way that we see the world.

In the words of Abraham Heschel, understanding God to be that which is holy, not necessarily a being,

Prayer invites God

to be present in our spirits and in our lives.

Prayer cannot bring water to parched land,

nor mend a broken bridge,

nor rebuild a ruined city,

but prayer can water an arid soul,

mend a broken heart,

and rebuild a weakened will.

What does the Divine want from me?

We can make the world a more holy, sacred place, or not. We can choose to use or empower, to build or destroy (and circumstances will determine which is the right and which the wrong choice), to lift up or bring down. We name that which we identify as good. If we are hoping to strengthen that which is good in the world, then one would expect to see us seeking to do that to the best of our abilities, not faltering when it impinges on our personal preferences or privileges.

We cannot know if the divine has an active will for us. Theologically, many have postulated that such is so; the accounting for the tragedy in the world often relies upon an understanding of that divine will being beyond our comprehension. It is, however,

another theological construct, equally open to examination as are all human constructions.

What exactly is the divine and how will I recognize it in myself/others?

The divine/sacred/holy is that without which life would not be life as we know it. Beyond tangible things, the values by which we live, the meaning we find in life that calls us to extend ourselves for the betterment of the earth and all of creation, the relationships we have, all these things are essential to our understanding of life. Strip them away and we would have devolved to the level of an animal consciousness. In our seeing them as essential, we recognize a holiness in them, a sacredness. We will hold to them beyond anything else in life. We would, if called upon, perhaps even give our lives for them.

We can believe these things exist regardless of our knowledge or awareness of them, in other words, they are not contingent upon our believing in them. Or we can believe that they do not exist without our creating them through our own projection of values and meaning upon the world. Either way, we can still choose to live in a manner that upholds those things as sacred/divine/holy and worthy of our life's energy, or as though they are expendable and worthless. It is our choice.

How do I know if I'm leading a life that is a positive to the universe?

You'll know.

APPENDIX F

Articles On The Understanding Of God, The Observer, November 2010

Nancy Steeves

‘God is a mystical presence and evolving energy’

Two years ago, I invited members and friends of Southminster-Steinhauer United in Edmonton to describe the shape of their faith. Among other things, I was interested in knowing what we mean when we use the word “God.” Respondents were asked to describe their current understanding of God.

Of the 178 participants, 21 said they understood God to be a person-like supernatural being who intervenes in the world. Seven indicated that they don’t believe there is a God, and a further 26 said they didn’t know whether there is a God or not. The overwhelming majority (108 people) framed their understanding of God as not a person-like being, but being itself. Others understood God as mystery of creation, mystical presence and evolving energy that connects everything.

As a theologically expansive and diverse congregation, we mean many different things when we use this one small word “God.” Just two consonants and one vowel carry an enormous history of human constructs. Fifty years ago, leading Protestant theologian Paul Tillich argued that we should have a moratorium on the use of the word “God” for the next century or so. I believe our failure to heed Tillich’s wisdom has limited our understandings of the mystery we have named “God.”

God was first introduced to me as a proper noun, the name given to a supernatural being who created the world, resides in heaven and presides over all things. In my post-seminary and early years in ministry, my understandings evolved into thinking of God as ultimate reality, both beyond and within us, mother- and father like, source of all love but limited in power by the laws of nature. And now, I find myself reaching from those roots toward a post-theistic sense of God as the evolutionary impulse or sacred energy in all things and in which all things have being.

Currently, “God” is not a word I use very much because it seems to con- note a “who” rather than a “what.” These three letters of the alphabet seem inadequate to express the more mystical sense I have now of the divine as being-ness. I speak less of God and more of the sacred, divine or holy. I speak fewer anthropomorphic metaphors and more expansive ones like “deep ocean of being” or “spirit in and beyond breath.” For me, these images are more helpful in pointing toward the wordless and deep mystery in which we, and all things, have our being. *Rev. Nancy Steeves is in ministry with Southminster-Steinhauer United in Edmonton.*

Ross Lockhart

‘God is Trinity – revealer, revealed and revealing’

The first few steps of Vancouver’s Grouse Grind are deceptively easy. Within minutes, however, the mountainside pilgrimage steepens considerably. With sweat trickling down my brow, I tried

to remember why this workout was supposed to help me answer the question, what do I mean by “God”?

Perhaps like St. Patrick tending sheep on Ireland’s Slemish Mountain, I expected a moment of sudden revelation. Yes, that was it. Revelation. After all, God clearly has a desire to know and be known by God’s creatures. “I will walk among you and be your God and you shall be my people,” the Divine declares in Leviticus 26:12.

Grinding my way up Grouse Mountain, I soaked in the beauty of creation and heard the voice of Patrick declare, “I arise today in power’s strength, invoking the Trinity . . . in Sun’s brightness, in Moon’s radiance, in Fire’s glory, in Wind’s swiftness, in Sea’s depth, in Rock’s fixity.” As my hiking boot kicked up some loose stones, I reflected on the Celtic church’s ability to fuse a respect for creation with an abiding love of the Trinity. As someone always in the process of becoming Christian, this has served as both faithful guide and companion.

Passing a makeshift memorial for a hiker who suffered a fatal heart attack on the Grind, I reflected on how God also provides such meaning for life, death and life beyond death. This Trinity — revealer, revealed and revealing — transforms us in community and mends this broken world.

The Celtic tradition has taught me that our joyful response to God’s revelation requires something more than belief: trust. St. Columbanus once preached, “A road is to be walked upon and not lived in, so that they who walk upon it may dwell finally in the land that is their home.” St. Brigit walked that road by feeding the poor at personal risk. St. Brendan and friends set out on a voyage seeking the will of God “as wandering pilgrims all the days of our lives.” Trust and risk. At times, our contemporary expression of Christianity lacks both.

Reaching the apex of the Grouse Grind, I soaked in the view of soaring skyscrapers, graceful bridges and ocean grandeur. What I mean by “God” a bit clearer now, my whispered prayers joined with the Celtic Christians of old who declared: Let us adore the Lord, Maker of marvelous works, Bright heaven with its angels, and on earth the white-waved sea.

Rev. Ross Lockhart is minister at West Vancouver (B.C.) United and co-editor of Three Ways of Grace.

Bruce Sanguin

‘God’s creativity is expressed through the evolving cosmos’

In the song Lord of the Starfields, Bruce Cockburn prays to his God: “O Love that fires the sun, keep me burning.” After 13.7-billion years, the love that fired the universe into being is still firing through an evolutionary process infused by the radiance of the divine.

There was a time when I understood the universe to be something outside me, something to be looked upon. Today, this objective relationship to the cosmos has been supplanted by a more mystical understanding. I am also the presence of the universe in human form — the conscious face of evolution. When I choose to live as a manifestation of this fire, I feel most alive. My big self is as large as a cosmos and still expanding. This I call my soul.

The two fundamental characteristics of God are creativity and love. These can be distinguished but not separated; each is folded into the other. Divine creativity is expressed primarily in and through the evolutionary history of the universe. The evolving cosmos, including life on our planet, is the incarnation of God's deep creative desire for love to find its fullest expression. The story of evolution, then, is itself a sacred text, revealing God's heart and intention. I consider the evolutionary process to be a divine strategy, one that humans have become consciously aware of for the deep realization of love.

My core spiritual practice as a Christian is to situate myself in the same stream of divine/cosmic yearning that animated and took flesh in Jesus of Nazareth — and to do so until I become one with this impulse. When I am in this yearning, this blessed unrest to be the incarnational presence of God's love and creativity, I experience the joy of deep purpose.

This is Christian discipleship, then, to be a student of this divine yearning and to consent, with Mary, to Spirit's invitation to give birth to the Christ in the world. To be in this divine desire is to be anointed with the same "vocational arousal" (to borrow a phrase from author Barbara Marx Hubbard) that animated Jesus of Nazareth. It is to undergo a fundamental identity shift, through the realization that we are occasions of the divine creativity and love coursing through the cosmos, and we are imbued with the purpose of birthing the "new thing" God is doing. Anointed and called to be the new thing that is eternally springing forth from the heart of God, we proclaim and enact the kingdom of God.

Rev. Bruce Sanguin is minister at Canadian Memorial United in Vancouver and the author of Darwin, Divinity and the Dance of the Cosmos.

George Hermanson

'God sets down the melody; we offer it back to God'

Believe it or not, most mainline Christians have had a mystical or religious experience. But in order to make sense of these transcendent experiences, we need a new way to understand God — one that makes sense in our world. In our quest for religious authenticity, a relational view of God gives us an understanding of divine power and compassion. This view is called "panentheism."

Panentheists experience God as both subject and mystery — the personal and the eternal. God is in the world and the world is in God, and God is more than the world. God is the necessary and eternal source for the world; it is God's creative act that makes nothing into something, that brings order out of chaos. God depends on the world because the nature of God's actual experience depends on the interaction with all living reality. As author and theologian Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki put it, "God is the supremely related one."

God is at home in this unfinished creation. God loves to work with the independence in the created order. God offers novelty, and we use our freedom to react. The world is at play, able to mess up and to go forward. The future unfolds through God offering possibilities, aims and beauty to each moment. We, in turn, respond and add to the offering. God responds again.

God's power is relational and persuasive, not coercive. What we say and do has an effect on how God will respond. God gives but also receives; acts but also is acted upon; has a vision but is open to change and transformation. There is a call and response built into our relational world, and the world develops through it.

Imagine a jazz group. God sets down the melody. It is passed on to the others in the group, and they get the feel for it. Each listens closely to what the others are saying. Each, in turn, adds originality, colour and difference, tweaking the piece to offer it back to God. God now has to work with what was created by the subjective experiences of the players. God has to feel the offering to give it more feeling. The piece is transformed, to arrive at some satisfaction, which then becomes the ground for the next moments of improvisation. God with us. Alive. Creating. Transforming. Visioning. Maturing. It is within our experience of the world that we vividly experience the presence of God.

Rev. George Hermanson is the director of the Madawaska Institute for Culture and Religion near Burnstown, Ont.

Susan Beaver

'An old and immense turtle lives at the bottom of the lake'

The people on the reserve say an old and immense turtle lives at the bottom of this lake. They say no one knows how deep the lake is. Jagged rocks, steep banks, scruffy grasses, Ponderosa pines and mountains surround it. There is one place flat enough to sit or pray or rest.

I am standing at the edge of the lake for my morning prayers. The sun is up but not over the hills. I have my tobacco in my left hand, my eyes are closed and I am giving thanks to and for all of creation. When I say, "I turn my mind now to all the plant foods," I feel a nudge at my consciousness like a tug on my sleeve. I brush it off and continue giving thanks. A few minutes later, as I give thanks "that the trees remember their original instructions and continue to do their work," the tug comes again, gentle but more insistent. I think there must be someone around like a kingfisher or an eagle but hopefully not a rattlesnake. A little while later, I am about to turn my mind to gratitude for "all the enlightened teachers who've come to us" when the tug on consciousness comes again, still gentle but very insistent. I've had enough. I put my hands on my hips, open my eyes and say, "Okay, what?"

I'd drop to my knees if I could move. The world loves too much. The sun and the sunlight love me like their grand- daughter. So do the hills, lake, cactus and the black bear I saw two days ago. The sky and wind love me, and they love each other. The turtle in the lake loves us all. I want to say some- thing but I can't think. This love lives in all creation and is for all creation. It is too much. I look at the ground to find some- thing solid to hold on to, but instead I feel a grain of sand radiating a love that is bigger than the mountains. It loves and feels loved. I know now that everything we call wind or people or stones are vessels for this love.

A long time later I say, "Thank you." I tell this story to Madeline, one of the elders from the reserve. She chuckles, waves her hand and says, "Oh, that's God."

Susan Beaver is a student minister at Grand River United on Ontario's Six Nations Reserve.

Greer Anne Wenh-In Ng

‘God embodies wholism and shares power’

Let me begin by sharing three basic assumptions. First, all talk about God is a metaphorical and inadequate effort to describe, using human experience and language, what is ultimately beyond description. Second, all such attempts are shaped by each explorer’s identity and social location, limited yet enriched by their spiritual history and experience. Third, this particular exploration is set in the context of the globally interconnected, ecologically conscious, postmodern world of the early 21st century.

For me, God is indeed “Holy Mystery,” as described in A Song of Faith, the United Church’s most recent faith statement. God is Ultimate Reality, the Great Ultimate, the Dao/Tao. In human experience, such Reality is incarnated in the Asian triune concept of tian (sky/heaven), di (earth) and ren (humanity), and is connected by the flow of qi/ch’i (universal energy or spirit). As a member of the Christian community, I have also inherited various human-like images of God, along with a Trinitarian doctrine of Father/Maker, Son/Christ and Spirit/Advocate. From time to time, some of these ideas have to be reformulated if they are no longer true to life or life-giving. Others may have to be recovered if they have been neglected or ignored.

For our present age, the kind of God who can bring wholeness or salvation to our conflict-prone and environmentally at-risk world and to its marginalized minorities is one who embodies wholism, and shares power as re-imagined by feminist theologians.

Ultimate Reality today can also best be experienced in plurality and diversity: A God who rejoices in difference, in just and intercultural relating, who can be imagined with non-white features. From a post-colonial perspective, this God is one of cultural and religious multiplicity rather than monotheistic monopoly. This God is capable of admitting more than one kind of trinity, plus the “four directions” of Aboriginal spirituality. Acutely aware of past political, cultural and religious colonization of the West over “the rest,” this God recognizes as valid scriptures of “other” faith traditions, oral and written.

And what does such a God, acting creatively and redemptively in our world, require of us today? What else but to continue to seek justice, love kindness and walk humbly (Micah 6:8) yet confidently, participating with many different partners in God’s mission of mending the world?

Rev. Greer Anne Wenh-In Ng is professor emerita of Christian education at Emmanuel College in Toronto.

APPENDIX G

Essential Agreement (2013)

In response to a request by a member of the “Below Average United Church Ministers’ Closed Facebook Group as to why I believed I, as an atheist, remained in essential agreement with the Statements of Doctrine of the United Church, I wrote the following response and subsequently posted it to my blog.

The post was originally accompanied with an edited version of the United Church Crest. I had removed the Alpha and Omega and replaced them with the encircled A which is often used as a symbol for atheism. Although the United Church engaged a legal firm which advised Facebook that I was infringing copyright, I do not believe that was true; my adaptation of the crest was an editorial comment and, as such, permissible under Canadian law. Nevertheless, I removed it.

But the alteration had what I believe was an important rationale behind it which didn’t get explored adequately. I think it is an important conversation that we need to have in the church and the request from the FB group could, potentially, have begun that conversation. Unfortunately, if it happened, I wasn’t included in the discussion. Here, then, is the reason behind the adaptation of the crest which was removed from my blog and Facebook.

New Testament scholar, Elaine Pagels, had recently published her work on the book, *Revelations: Visions, Prophecy, and Politics in the Book of Revelation*. In it, she argues that the book was a polemic against those who were sharing the gospel message with Gentiles. The author’s argument was that the gospel was meant exclusively for the Jews and that those who were sharing it beyond the Israelite cult were acting against God’s wishes.

The Book of Revelations is the only place in the Bible that includes the use of “Alpha and Omega” as a descriptor for the “Lord God.” The intertwined symbol of the letters on the United Church crest, then, is a reminder of the exclusive nature of the message of Revelations, an exclusivity which, had it been triumphant and prevented the dissemination of the gospel beyond the Jews, would likely have spelled the end of Christianity before it had even really begun. Replacing that symbol with the encircled A was not merely the switching out of one symbol for another similar to it in form. It was meant to draw attention to the fact that we have the opportunity to close ranks and exclude or to open our ministry up and engage. The predecessors whose symbol is on the crest of the United Church would have had us close ranks. I believe our message, not one of the bodily resurrection of a crucified preacher or the assurance of a comfortable afterlife, but of the importance of radically altering our selfish desires to include the welfare of all life on the planet and the preservation of a selfless idea of love that can inspire future generations to do the same, is a message that deserves to be shared. We cannot afford to close ranks as the symbol on our crest reminds us we might, long ago, have done. If someone had asked me why I did it, I would have happily told them; dialogue, in my United Church tradition, has never been the easier way but it has been the way of greater dignity and wisdom. I lament that there has been so little dialogue in these past many years.

And here is the blog which the crest had been adapted to accompany...

When I was ordained, it was (and I think remains) beyond my power (“ultra vires”) to state that I was in essential agreement with the Statements of Faith; the Education and Students Committee of Conference had to determine if candidates were in essential agreement and, if the committee was so convinced, to present the ordinands to the Conference to be voted upon. The doctrinally drenched questions you will need to answer will bar many excellent leaders from entering the United Church because they can only be answered guilelessly if one believes in a strictly theistic interpretation of God. I lament that those who cannot answer the UCC’s 2007 ordination questions because of the theistic language inherent in them will not be working with you and me to create and nurture places of belonging for those Canadians who, regardless of their beliefs, might otherwise look to the UCC for a “spiritual” home. I lament that many who read the arguments taking place on Facebook find themselves excluded from the church in ways they never imagined they would be.

The concept of a theistic god is one that I was encouraged throughout my childhood, my theological training, and my ministry, to wrestle with and, for the most part, discard. (This should not be a surprise, raised as I was with the New Curriculum in Sunday school and studying contemporary critical scholarship at seminary.) At the same time, I was given metaphorical understandings of religious terms such as “god” and stories such as the resurrection that helped me make sense of religion and my world. I have come to believe, however, that using theistic language metaphorically without disclosing that you are doing so is a form of dishonesty in which I no longer wish to participate, fluent in it though I once was. And simply saying that God is a metaphor without saying what it is a metaphor “for”, if not dishonest, is at least lacking in clarity.

As an atheist, I do not believe in a theistic god called God and, although I did as a child, by the time I reached theological college, I was hungry for another interpretation of the concept. There I found not one but several and a permission to create and mould my theological understanding as it suited the context in which I would be challenged to preach it (Paul). I was astonished when, after a decade of doing so, I found that very few, if any, congregants recognized that my understanding of the concept of god or my interpretations of the stories of the Bible were metaphors for life and the costly love we are, at every turn, challenged to weave into it. When I tried to figure out why no one was “getting it”, it wasn’t hard to find: everything in my services other than my sermons was steeped in a pre-Copernican theology. And it was a fickle theology that could be used to reinforce any number of grievous assaults on humanity, the planet, and ourselves. Indeed, I was ordained at a time when many members of the United Church used that same language and the literal interpretations of the stories we thought we were presenting as metaphors to argue in support of the denial of rights and access to the LGBTQ community. I have seen, as most of my colleagues have, the ugliness

that a literal ignorance of scripture can uphold. I could no longer affirm such theology through the use of terms that reinforce it and so began disentangling my understanding of god, the concept of god, from it.

Science, anthropology, psychology, sociology, and Biblical history and criticism have offered us the insight that long ago, in order to explain reality and quell our fear and helplessness, we as humans gradually took the highest and best of human characteristics, ideals and activities, constructed an image of a supernatural being, and projected the best (and sometimes the worst) of ourselves onto it. Like us, but not like us, this god was not merely good but wholly good, not merely powerful, but all-powerful, not merely wise, but all-wise. Like us, but not like us, this god could not merely say and do things, but intervene with supernatural power to change things for the better. In my theological education, we were taught to reverse this historical view and take “god” words as metaphors for these very qualities and activities that they originally matched: our highest ideals, our strength and wisdom, our goodness and compassion, and also our capacity to act for good in the world. If, then, god-words, doctrinal words, are metaphors for these vital, human attributes and possibilities, it seems clear to me that we either be perfectly clear each time we use doctrinal terms that we are speaking only as metaphor, or simply use the words directly. Awe, wonder, integrity, connection, empathy, kindness, justice – these are precious and powerful and necessary all on their own – they need no other authority or validation. If the United Church is demanding that its people use metaphorical language instead of direct language to express themselves, then we run the danger of distancing, even alienating ourselves from the millions of people who cherish these values and take part in acts of justice and compassion without using metaphors about the idea of god or the god, God, to describe them. We at West Hill cherish the same values as the United Church has always and continues to stand for. We have chosen to speak of those values directly, not metaphorically. We make no claims for what we do not and cannot know. We honour everyone’s right to hold the beliefs they choose. We want to be about the work that moves us beyond the beliefs that divide to the unity of purpose that will enable us to live with deep respect for ourselves, for others, and for the planet.

I believe, as Don Cupitt says in his latest book, that anyone trained in a mainline theological seminary can be nothing other than a sceptic when it comes to the theistic god called God. That scepticism often takes us far beyond the doctrinally theistic God who “calls” you to ministry. I suspect that most of my colleagues could not complete the statement, “When I use the word ‘god’, I mean...” without resorting to non-, post-, or a-theistic language. Often, (as I suspect recently happened in the interview printed in the current Observer) the question is avoided by clergy who are uncomfortable walking too close beside me; their answers would distance them from the classical theism they want to be seen (by their parishioners) to believe. Once you let people know you use the word metaphorically, that it doesn’t mean a supernatural god that can intervene in human affairs or the natural world, it gets challenging. Answering the onslaught

of subsequent questions is difficult. I have already heard far too many clergy patronizingly tell me they, too, don't believe in the god I don't believe in while being unwilling to tell me "and their parishioners" what they mean when they use that word, and responsibly answering the ensuing questions. Neither have they been willing to admit that the reality of the god they don't believe in manifests and supports all kinds of horrors around this world and that it continues to be fed by the liberal assent to belief that the Bible is TAWOGFAT (The Authoritative Word of God for All Time). As the liberal mitigation of the power of that god abates with the decline of the mainline church, fundamentalist beliefs, often nurtured by an absence from church ("I don't need to go to church to be a good Christian") that has bred a frightening biblical and ethical ignorance over generations, will only grow in strength and that is something I fear; you should, too.

I was opposed to the latest remit on the recognition of the various statements of faith as subordinate documents. My perspective did not prevent (or even influence) the conversation my congregation had which led them to vote in favour of the remit. My concerns were that the discussion at GC was pre-empted by John Young's motion which, in my opinion, circumvented the initial intent of Saskatchewan Conference's petition. They had argued that the language and theology of the Articles of Faith of the Basis of Union were no longer representative of the beliefs of the denomination's members (or what was being taught in theological seminaries) and were hampering the ordination process for those who believed differently. But the motion Young made argued the primacy of the Bible, something we, as a denomination, had refused to acknowledge a decade or so before. Young, and those who helped him frame the motion, were inserting into our theology a more rigid and orthodox doctrine than the denomination had embraced in practice in some years. That they framed it in a motion that suggested it was a "progressive" step and travelled the country to reinforce that, assured its success. It could be argued that the Bible is now established as the authoritative document of the United Church; however, since that belief was something originally only recognized in what we have since proclaimed a "subordinate" document, it is as trustworthy as the Bible being the only source (beyond personal "interpretation" of experience) for any proof of God.

Because I can easily come up with a definition of the word "god" that would allow me to use it as many of my colleagues do, that is, without any compromise of my lack of belief in an interventionist deity, I could easily resurrect my use of theological language and use it to share my perspectives on the world, personal realities, politics, economics (Jesus against Caesar or Empire as Dom Crossan would put it) and be easily affirmed as being in "essential agreement". I cannot do so because it would be dishonest in that it would allow others to project onto my words things that I do not believe but that are common within their use. We have little time for dissembling. The losses that I believe are associated with the decline of mainline, liberal denominations like the UCC are significant and have

been rippling through society for decades. The effects are now growing, mounting like tidal waves and contributing to the challenges communities, nations, and humanity are experiencing. Bringing people together who want to work to oppose these forces is, I believe, what the stories of Jesus were about. Not all of them, of course, but some of them and we only ever use some of them, basing our interpretations of Jesus on the interpretations we want to believe are right. (Check out the voting procedures for the Jesus Seminar or any other process that seeks to remove subjectivity from outcomes. Or, think about leadership skills and promise me you won't model your relationship with your first Board on the relationship Jesus had with his disciples, calling them all sorts of names and expressing exasperation with their stupidity! We all pick and choose and it is wise to do so.) Whether they came from an individual, were woven around much older, Hebraic tales, grew out of ancient Egyptian mythology, were infused with Platonic thought, or were, as has most recently been argued, crafted by first century Romans, is of little import to me. Whatever it takes to build community around the principle of love being lived out along the edge of a ragged and complex justice and a deeply empathic compassion is what I want to work toward. If the fact that I do so without using the word "god" or focusing on ancient stories of a man who may or may not have been an intrinsic part of the original telling of those stories sets me apart from the denomination that taught me to think this way, I am both surprised and deeply saddened by that.

The West Hill Board and I reflect from time to time (based on whatever challenging decision we may be wrestling with) on the possibility that I or we will be rejected by the United Church. Each time, we have determined that the cost of creating inspirational community beyond the beliefs that divide is such an important element of our work that we must take the risk involved. Providing a language that is barrier-free is the only way to do that and, to date, our decisions have kept us focused on that work. It may not be your work and it may not even be recognized by some as United Church work. But I think it is UCC work in exactly the same way as was the ordination of women, the acceptance of divorce, the advocacy for a woman's right to choose, the acceptance, celebration and ordination of people of diverse sexualities and gender truths, the breaking of apartheid, the boycott of goods from illegal Israeli settlements, etc., etc., and I hope that the United Church can be a haven for those who are otherwise excluded, exiled, or marginalized by the church because their beliefs are not reflected within the language of its doctrine or who simply want to come together in community – beyond the beliefs that divide humanity – to struggle toward a sustainable future, the right relationships with self, others, and the planet that can be manifest within it, and to be inspired and supported as they do so. That's the work we are currently about and I will continue to support and nourish that work in whatever way I can because it needs to be done, with or without the god called God, and with or without essential agreement. While some may lose sleep over that, others lose sleep when they hear of United Church ministers tying 13 year olds to crosses and dabbing them with red paint. The UCC is a big tent and those opposed to the work we do aren't the only ones who sometimes wonder if that tent is too big.

Accusations are plenty when it comes to the perception of privilege I and my congregation experience by remaining in the United Church. Some suggest that our building is a benefit we don't deserve because we aren't really Christian; others argue I am taking advantage of the United Church's benefits or remain in the United Church because of my pension. I feel I need to ensure that people are aware that West Hill is not dependent upon the United Church financially. Sometimes, because we attract people who have no church experience or who come from other, more hierarchical denominations, we have to explain that we pay our own bills from donations received from those in the congregation and beyond who support our work but this is not something I would expect I would need to explain to other United Church clergy. West Hill continues to pay its TUCC held mortgage and, as it does so, increases the property holdings of The United Church of Canada, not our own private reserves. We recognize that, should we be asked to leave the denomination, we would leave behind the church building we currently call home but maintain on behalf of the UCC. Quite frankly, we would be better off financially were we to be free of that responsibility. We continue to support the Mission and Service Fund of the United Church recognizing that much of the work it does is work we believe needs to keep happening. We continue to contribute to the medical and dental plan which benefits all UCC personnel and to the pension plan, the payout of which hovers around the national poverty line. All of the contributions to that pension fund (your pension fund) will have been paid directly by me and the people who work alongside me in this work. Clearly, one is not in the ministry in The United Church of Canada for either the salary or the pension.

The bigger question for me is not whether or not I am in essential agreement with the denomination or whether West Hill has a right to remain within the UCC but whether the UCC is able to be honest about the dissonance between the education it provides its clergy and that being received by those in the pews. Can we be honest about believing in a metaphorical understanding of god? Can we survive that conversation with our parishioners and supporters? Can we do what William Sparrow, Dean of Virginia Theological Seminary in the mid-nineteenth century challenged his students to do? "Seek the truth, come whence it may, cost what it will, lead where it might"? That is the question that I have because I am betting every day on this denomination and that it has the strength and the courage to be forthright with its members about what we really mean when we use the word "god" and that it will stop obfuscating and so be able to enter into a meaningful and important conversation about what it will take to save, really save, humanity. And it isn't the god most people think you're talking about when you use that word, nuanced and enriched as you believe your interpretations are. Whether you believe in a divine, interventionist god or not, we (humans, not Christians) are, when it comes right down to it, the only answer we have to the problems that plague humanity today. I am betting on the United Church being intentional about being in the midst of that important conversation, engaging in it with integrity, providing safe, barrier-free space for it to happen, and celebrating those individuals and congregations that have the courage to work toward such goals. If

the UCC breaks faith with that work – work in which it has been engaged throughout the whole of my life – because it chooses the reinforcement of exclusive doctrine over that important and costly work, it will be I who will have been betrayed, not the denomination. The United Church I love and give my life to is not about defending the faith but about defending human rights and the planet we live on; not about being right but about being compassionate and just and courageous; not about being separate and distinct, but about being engaged and involved; not about requiring uniformity in doctrine but unity in love for one another.

APPENDIX H

Walrus Talks Spirituality: Beyond The Beliefs That Divide

Gretta Vosper

Heaven, Nirvana, Paradise; She'ol, Limbo, Purgatory; Jahannam, Hell, the Chinvat Bridge to Darkness.

Each of these describes a place beyond this world, a realm without substance created and populated exclusively by religion. Some are places of place of beauty and delight, where those who have accepted this or that belief repose in peace; others, torment for those who denied "the truth". The rest either processing facilities for second chances or simple storage for the dead.

Most religions lay out for their follower's pathways to paradise and road maps to hell. They have done so for millennia. Many see that as their job.

These lands divide us. Not only after death but more dangerously while we yet live. They divide us because their sovereignty is debated. We make war with one another over who lays claim to paradise; who wields the power to cast into hell....

Our arguments over these questions have spilled more blood than we have courage to consider. They still do, wreaking devastation upon lives, communities, whole nations. They have the power to drive us to our own destruction; the heaven-industrial complex, perpetually fueling a dispute over territory none can see but few in power will refute.

Children whose lives are trapped in trauma, often create coping behaviours that make their survival possible. It's a manifestation of their strength: their survival instinct pressed into service. But as these children grow, what they created in order to live, sometimes comes to hinder growth, to threaten their ability to thrive.

We were those children. The traumas of our childhood are legion. We had no way to understand the horrors of a chaotic world or the brutality of our own baser instincts. Long, long ago, we wove the joys and sorrows of our lives into these intangible lands, and cast them beyond this world, beyond its capricious terrors and rapturous delights. "The consolation of imaginary things is not imaginary consolation," says philosopher Roger Scruton. And to turn his words around: the fear of imaginary threats is not imaginary fear. Fear may have saved us. Consolations may have seen us through. *We conjured whole worlds to survive*, manifestations of our strength, our survival instinct pressed into service and it worked; it is entirely possible that we are here today because those ethereal worlds saved us from acts that may have led to our own extinction somewhere back along history's silken thread.

But we have grown; the stories we contrived to keep us safe now threaten our future. Armed with the tools of twenty-first century warfare, our consolations come with massive cost. They've become weapons of mass destruction, free to be taken up by those whose arguments are not

meant to secure our future here on earth. Our fighting over lands we can neither chart nor defend has a tragic human cost that is paid every day.

But, there is another land we've been conjuring upon which we might build a peaceful future. Formed of the same elements of our early dreams, the hopes we pasted on the heavens, it began to coalesce as we lifted ourselves, theory by theory, truth by truth, out of the murk of childhood's unknowing and into the accessibility of shared knowledge, out of the chaos of ignorance and into the promise of reason, the discoveries of science, the findings of our explorations. Out of absolute truths and into unceasing wonder. And though its beginnings were as insubstantial as Nirvana and the Bridge to Darkness, it has steadily been realized over the past centuries. It writes a different future for those we love and those they love and those they, too, will love. It is the land we create beyond the beliefs that divide.

This land, beyond the beliefs that divide, is public property; only those things accessible to all will thrive within it. worked out amongst people accountable only to one another, willing to take up the challenge to weave the moral fabric of community within the idea of a sustainable future, to explore the immensity of reality and the complexity of truth, and to do so with unflinching courage.

There are no gods here to interfere with love and justice. But neither are they forced to give up the doctrinal lands they rule or the people that commit to following them whose consolations, if lived out peaceably, are not ours to confiscate. Here, the gods are simply asked both to remain within the private realms of lives still strengthened by their presence and to relinquish their hold on those long-judged by ancient moral codes.

The good our religions have taught us - to act justly, love mercy, walk humbly - that good thrives here. But religion never owned this ground. It is built of empathy, a natural neurological function that we can strengthen or starve; the choice is ours. Beyond the beliefs that divide, empathy reigns. Here in Canada, we've made that land more real every time we've stepped away from religious doctrines that trouble justice: the personhood of women, the right to an abortion, the marriage of same sex couples, the Supreme Court decision last year to allow for Physician assisted dying, and most recently, the challenges presented to our nation from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, challenges that remind us justice is not yet realized, the land beyond the beliefs that divide is not yet complete.

It is here that we who work in the worlds of the insubstantial - the terrains of love, of faith, of morality and meaning - spirituality, if you will - we who teach the art of living in right relationship with ourselves, with others, with our world - here, we might do our best work. I call it Empact - an empathic impact on the world in which we live and that of future generations. We are challenged to nurture communities within which strength and courage - not beliefs - are fostered and to inspire these communities to impact their worlds, to embrace the tangled work of love and justice, of healing the wounds we have inflicted on our world, on one another, in the name of belief. Through impact, we call ourselves beyond hostility, beyond arrogance, beyond the fears that have bound us so that all might live this land into being. Out of nothing into reality. Out of now, through impact, into a world that will thrive beyond the beliefs that divide.