

**President's Report to Annual Meeting of Conference of MNWO,
May 24, 2018**

Greetings everyone:

It is my very great honour and pleasure to address you in my role as Conference President. Typically the President is expected to give a brief overview of the year in review, and some words of inspiration and encouragement as we move forward. But after reading the Staff reports in your workbook, I realize that the year in review has been especially well covered. I also realize this has so not been a typical or normal year.

As I start, I want to reiterate my thanks to each and every one of our Conference staff and the many volunteers across the church that collectively have made my year as President such an awesome and joy-filled experience. I've grown and changed far more than I dreamed I would, and that was due to all of you. Working with our staff and volunteers has always felt like a team endeavor.

You will find more specifics in my written report, but I needed to say THANK YOU one more time.

I am aware that as we gather together from all parts of the Conference, from Cambrian, to Assiniboine, from Northland to Agassiz, Selkirk and Winnipeg— we come celebrating our long history and fellowship in the United Church of Canada. We also come wondering about the future.

At this point in the journey - Where do you find yourself? What about your congregation?

Glass half full – Glass half empty.

Time to get on with it? Need more answers?

Comfortable living into the New? Grieving what we've had?

Don't like change? Or are you worrying that the change won't be big enough to be worth doing?

Sick of hearing about it already?

Does it vary depending on the day?

I expect most of us will say yes to some if not all of these statements: It may not help - but be reassured, whatever you are feeling - you are not alone.

But how do we move forward with faith and assurance?

Personally, I take hope and strength from the many discussions I've heard from across the Conference. People care passionately for our church. I also take hope from your stories. Stories of the prophetic United Church voices who are challenging the male establishment at Ministerial meetings, challenging them to consider differing perspectives on scripture and to wonder about Jesus calling us all to be accepting, & forgiving. I take hope from the many examples of United Church members walking in Pride parades, planning sustainable energy exhibits, welcoming forest fire evacuees (yes, again) and Syrian refugees, of those participating in Blanket exercises and Sharing Circles, ... and – and - so many examples. The Spirit is already blowing through us,

through our congregations and through our communities. May we continue to be open to receiving it with enthusiasm and grace.

Building on the Wind & Spirit theme, One of my current favorite change quotes comes from Judy Hare, courtesy of her Maritime roots.

“You can’t change the wind, but you can adjust the sails”.

I’ve also heard a number of comments comparing this time of change with the changes experienced around Church Union in 1925. Intrigued I did look back and noted some interesting factoids. Did you know in 1928 the National church gathered for the third General Council in - you guessed it- Winnipeg.

In 1928 our new United Church was alive and healthy, and local members from those three former denominations were actively working together. The important message for me is just that - the church continued to thrive and not just survive. Change did indeed bring renewed energy and life to our church community – as it gathered in new ways. I am confident it will do so once again.

We are ALL One Body living together in God’s Community.

But that community is changing. Our numbers are shrinking, both in terms of members in the pews and the number of active worshipping congregations. I’ve recently heard predictions that in the next few years about 1000 of our 4000+ congregations will close. What does that change look like for those loyal long term congregational members? Glass half empty or Glass half full?

I believe we are called to envision new things, to dream new dreams.

Community has been an ever evolving concept. People now come together around a sports team, a Royal Wedding, a catastrophe. Is that still a community? This evolution applies not just to our local pastoral charge communities, or even our wider Conference community gathered here. With the benefits of technology, now the wider secular society is gathering together with people of Christian and other faith traditions. Often in response to a crisis or serious accident, these gatherings speak to our human hunger for community and for a shared spiritual connection.

Immediately after the Humboldt bus crash, the United Church of Canada was one of the voices speaking into the pain and the grief everyone was experiencing. Krystal Sheremeta, my counterpart as President of Saskatchewan Conference and minister in Nipawin, reached out to the wider community. She posted a Face Book message on the Saturday afternoon of that horrific weekend. For me her action and her words model the important way our United Church can speak that message of faith IN TO THE WIDER COMMUNITY, both churched and unchurched.

I will share only her opening lines.

On Friday evening joy, excitement, laughter and adrenaline for the upcoming competition filled the bus, and suddenly turned to fear, pain and heartache. God's heart was the first to break.

Today as our souls cry out in shock, ... as we are overwhelmed by the devastation again and again, we are assured that the Holy Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.

Many of you will have similar stories from your own experiences, times when Christian prayer and Words of Assurance are so necessary and so sustaining. We still need to offer and share those messages. The community still needs to hear those messages. I believe that in the coming years, as our local communities shrink and the wider electronically connected community grows – our church will find new ways to come together to worship, and new ways to offer that ministering voice into the wider community.

Now - please indulge me in a moment of personal disclosure. Technology is indeed a gift that connects us as never before. But it comes with challenges. My thanks to those of you here who alerted me to the fact that my email system was invaded by a phishing bug on Monday evening. I was sending emails asking for money. I'd been hacked!!! I Must confess - I used to be slightly "holier than thou" when my colleagues or friends were hacked... but now I am humbled.

Be reassured it is under control. The tech squad has scrubbed my computer, my actual email system is clean again – but if you do get a strange email from me, coming from a different email address – don't reply to it, just delete it. However, If you do want to send money to me – feel free. But maybe do it in person and I will pass it along to Mission and Service.

Besides alerting you, I share this slightly embarrassing story with you, as a metaphor for the normal bumps in the road we will continue to face as we move forward into the new. There will be issues - unfamiliar processes, frustrating technologies and time consuming procedures –

but they will be doable. May we respond with grace and move forward with confidence.

In closing, the message I want to leave you with is that I believe we are being called to imagine new things, new ways of living out Jesus's call to us to follow in his footsteps. In these turbulent times politically and economically; there is a need for prophetic social justice voices, voices that model respect for all perspectives and all people, voices that care for the environment and for the wider community.

In these times when so much is changing, when we prepare to say goodbye to one part of our Conference family, and to greet new neighbours - we also celebrate our many years of shared history: May we continue to focus on what God is calling us to – to care for our neighbour as ourselves, to live with respect in creation and to care passionately for the environment so that our children's children may be as blessed as we are. Yes, I am confident we can adjust our sails and continue to respond to the Spirit blowing us, perhaps even pushing us, forward!

May it be so!