

PROFILE- RETIREES



Nelson Hart

Reverend Nelson Hart, from Nelson House Manitoba (also known as Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation) started his ministry work in the late 1970's and began as a translator. His ministry training took him to many places starting with the United Church of Canada Indian Ministry training held in the Fisher River Cree Nation (Manitoba), to the University of British Columbia, to Arizona USA and finally at the former Jessie Saulteaux Training Centre (now known as Sandy Saulteaux Spiritual Centre). Nelson graduated in 1986 as an Ordained Minister. He recalls taking the training in Arizona with Reverend Christina Baker (deceased) who was from South Indian Lake.

Reverend Hart's first post was to God's Lake Narrow United Church for one year and from there he moved back to his home community of Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation. His first job with the Nelson House United Church was to do a funeral. The best gift in his ministry Nelson says was being able to help transition and bring the 'traditional' teachings into Nelson House United Church. Reverend Hart recalls the community did not allow traditional ways to be brought into the church at first, but slowly realized this is 'who we are as an Indigenous spiritual people'. He said he always asked first before making any changes, an important process in the Indigenous ways.

Nelson's first language is the Cree language and had to learn the English language so that he could participate in his ministry training and work, which made him 'bilingual'. He had a love for reading and was able to write using the Cree syllabics.

Nelson also remembers fondly of his travels with the United Church of Canada to places like, General Council in Nova Scotia, to a world gathering of churches on environmental issues in Germany and to General Council 43 in 2018 in Oshawa Ontario, just before the All Native Circle Conference closed its doors. Reverend Hart was one of the leading Elders for the Conference. He is forever grateful for the opportunity to bring his messages and perspective to the people on 'Who We Are'.

Reverend Hart senses much loss within the wider church...and if there is a fear of losing power or control within the wider church, his message is to 'listen, hear and raise the wisdom of the Indigenous Church so that *'spirituality'* becomes the core once again as to why we are here as a whole church'. His message to the younger and future church leaders is to go back to establishing Elders Councils as a better way of governing and supporting the work of the church. Board governance is not the Indigenous way! Our Indigenous churches really need to think about this.

Even though Reverend Nelson Hart is retiring as a Minister, he says 'I still want to be involved in the work of the church'. He is grateful for all the opportunities afforded to him by both the wider Church and the Indigenous Church.

Written by Gloria A. Cook with the permission of Reverend Nelson Hart – May 1, 2021

Jenny Sprong



I was born in South Africa in June 1951 and in 1973, I married a man who would enter the Methodist Ministry in 1975 and we raised two daughters.

In 2007, I was ordained to Word and Sacrament in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA).

In 2012, I was awarded a PhD in Feminist Ecclesiology & Social Transformation by the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

In 2013, I took early retirement in South Africa and came to Canada to serve in the St. Andrew's United Church in Swan River, Manitoba.

In 2018, I moved to the Roblin Knox UC in Roblin, Manitoba, from where I retired three years later – at the end of November 2020. I now reside in Chilliwack, BC.

My association with the United Church of Canada (UCC) began while I was actively involved – as a lay person – in the Women's Auxiliary of the MCSA, whilst representing our organisation at the World Methodist Conference in Singapore in 1991. There I met Dr Marion Logan from Cambridge, Ontario. In 1996, I was part of a diverse group of twelve MCSA women who had been invited on a Face-to-Face Experience in the then Toronto Conference. This experience was life-changing for me – confirming my call to full-time ministry. Three years later, I candidated for the ministry in the MCSA.

Although my period of active ministry in the UCC was only seven years (2013-2020), I am deeply grateful for my long association with this Denomination. As is my custom, I shall reflect on my time in the UCC by looking at what went well and also at what might have been done differently. Ministry is a calling that does not usually provide us with a pain-free existence. My experience was no exception.

What went well? My longing – right from the beginning of both my theological and ecclesiological studies – was to serve in a Church that acknowledged the place of women and included people of diverse sexual identities and walks of life. Everything I read about the UCC, pointed towards this

being the Denomination I was yearning for. That was so, at least until I started the application process. The reality soon showed that my dream to serve in an Affirming Church, was not going to be fulfilled in my first appointment. I discovered that each Pastoral Charge, Presbytery and Conference had to make their own decision about becoming Affirming. The Manitoba and North-Western Ontario Conference was already an Affirming Conference, the Northland Presbytery had entered into the process and became Affirming during my years in Swan River and, happily so, the Roblin Knox UC became Affirming the year before I joined them. So, what went **very well** is that eventually I did serve in a fully Affirming Community of Faith. I am deeply grateful for this experience. I was privileged to become good friends with people of a different sexual orientation and I treasure their friendship.

Another aspect of my UCC experience that went extremely well for me, was the Admissions Process, required by the UCC before fully admitting me to the Denomination. I loved the studies and excelled in all of them. I felt as if I got to know Lydia Gruchy personally – I read so much about her.

I had the good fortune of always being cared for by excellent Ministry & Personnel Committees – in both Communities of Faith in which I served. This was indeed a rare privilege – as I discovered when sharing my experiences with other colleagues in the UCC. I have made life-long friends in the congregations I served and this is a blessing I shall always treasure.

What might have been done differently? Hindsight is always the best teacher and for me this has also been true. I had had extensive experience in planning both National and International Conferences and Retreats. For two years, prior to coming to Canada, I had been the South African Chair for the Liturgy and Music Committee of the World Methodist Conference, which we hosted in Durban, South Africa, in 2011. I then discovered that Swan River would be hosting the Annual Meeting of the MNWO Conference seven months after I arrive. I felt positive that I could make some valuable contributions to this exciting endeavour only to discover – at the first planning meeting which I attended – that my contributions were not even going to be considered. I was literally ignored. This was a serious blow to my confidence as firstly, I was not accustomed to ministers not really having much of a say in how committees operated and secondly, it reinforced my status as a ‘newcomer’ to Canada. It was a very icy ‘welcome to Canada’ and this severely clouded my experience during that first year. Fortunately, I had plenty to keep me busy and I plunged myself into my studies, which I completed in record time.

The other major difficulty I experienced, was a new Board Chair – a volunteer – who followed a most competent Chairperson who had firmly declined to stand again. The congregation’s average age was in the mid-70s and leadership was becoming a major challenge. I soon approached this new Chairperson and, according to a UCC publication on effective leadership, asked to meet with him to discuss agendas and possible ways to draw in new leadership. His response to me (after a Board Meeting) was that in the UCC lay people ran the Church and that he would definitely not be meeting with me. Unfortunately, he was very angry and had raised his voice – those packing up and tidying the hall heard him and immediately took offense. A small group drafted a letter asking him to please respect their minister. This Board Chair then reported the small group and involved Presbytery and a ‘Review’ was held, which I believe was responding ‘strictly according to the rules’ (because the small group of leaders did not follow the Manual and get ten signatures, etc.) but I felt that the Presbytery Commission’s inquiry was completely unjust. This Chairperson’s rudeness and incompetence were not evaluated but my spiritual leadership was placed in question. Although the vast majority of the leadership (who were also interviewed) were standing with me, this ‘Review’

marred my experience of justice in the UCC. It seemed to be all about who you were connected with. That was very sad for many people on the leadership of this congregation and I felt as though it reflected on my integrity as a person. I am grateful to finally share this as few people knew about this heartbreaking experience, which I had to bear largely on my own.

Am I glad that we came to Canada? Yes, absolutely! We (Kevin and I) have made the most wonderful friends and we now live in the breathtakingly beautiful area of British Columbia. Thank you to colleagues who offered their friendship and took time to welcome a 'newcomer' to Canada. I do miss our two grandchildren but we are grateful for online technology and I am now a devoted Gogo.

Susan Tilleman



I feel honoured to have offered congregational ministry in five different pastoral charges over the past twenty-one years. My lay leadership skills and the encouragement of others, is what informed my decision to enter ministry at the age of forty. My journey in ministry began as a young mum in small town rural Saskatchewan. I was a member at Kamsack-Togo Pastoral Charge. It was the Togo congregation that offered me the opportunity to explore different areas in ministry and greatly encouraged me to seek discernment and move forward in Diaconal ministry. Thank You Rev. David Illman-White; you were a mentor and guide.

I entered my studies at the Centre for Christian Studies in 1995, along with over 20 others from across Canada. We were new and excited students meeting in Toronto in the centre, from Newfoundland to British Columbia and nearly every province in between.

During the five years of training we met in Toronto, Saskatoon, Winnipeg for two week intensive sessions once a year. As area cluster groups, we met once a year for two weeks as well. And on top of that the University academics... it was an intense five years of profound, eye opening experiential education and many reflections. I spent my ninemonth Congregational Field Placement at Preeceville-Sturgis communities with Rev. Miles Russel as my education facilitator. My social justice field placement was at Kamsack with an indigenous focus. My Global education took place at Guatemala City and rural areas.

I was Commissioned in 2000, during the Saskatchewan Conference at Yorkton, Saskatchewan. My first "Transfer and Settlement" experience took me to Rawdon, Quebec, about 40 minutes north east of Montreal in the Laurentians. Offering ministry in Quebec is an experience that was exciting, challenging, educational and wonderful. I wouldn't trade it for anything. I spent 3 years in Rawdon learning the culture of both English and French persons. I am still amazed at the rich heritage, culture, customs, language, country side and Catholic influence. After 3 years I moved to the Eastern

Townships in team ministry, where we served six different congregations that were experimenting with amalgamation. The new pastoral charge was named "The New Vision Pastoral Zone". The Eastern Townships communities consisted of Abbotsford and Granby, Waterloo and Fulford, Sutton and Dunham. The pastoral charge was not much more than 40 minute drive from one end to the other. The scenery was breath taking in all four seasons. The people were caring, compassionate and spirit filled. One experience that comes to mind is when I drove home after dark in a blinding snow storm on a winding road with a cliff on one side and my window down; my head getting soaked from the wet snow as I searched for indication of road on the left hand edge.

In 2008 I entered "Transfer and Settlement" once again, and was matched with Steinbach United Church in Manitoba. Steinbach was another strong cultural education. I spent over 5 years at this pastoral charge. While with this congregation they began the Affirmation Process, renovated the front offices and celebrated the church seasons with enthusiasm.

I then took a one and half year sabbatical before my appointment at Grey Street United Church in Winnipeg. Grey Street has been an excellent fit. I have greatly enjoyed and grown in ministry with this community. I am sad to leave the people, they will be missed greatly.

This past year I have been .5 at Grey Street and .5 at St. Paul's in Beausejour. It is my hope to be able to offer St. Paul's retirement supply for a few years. I am blessed to have found another good fit with the St. Paul's congregation.

It is with great joy that I move into retirement looking forward to the new adventures that await me. I love the idea of slowing down and doing other things that I love. I have been honoured to have walked in life and the Spirit with the people of all these communities.

*Yours in Christ,
Susan Tilleman D.M.*

