

REV. GARY PATERSON**Biographical Sketch**

I was born in 1949 in the Yukon, an “army brat” who lived in Toronto and Germany before ending up in Vancouver, where my family has 150 years of farming roots. A couple of degrees in English literature led to my becoming a Sessional Lecturer at UBC, and a “closet poet.” Then came theological studies in Boston, followed by an internship at Naramata, and a final year at VST—a “God struggler” who ended up saying yes to ordination (1977).

My ministry has been varied—small congregations, both rural and urban; several years on BC Conference staff, working in the areas of Congregational Support, Social Justice, and Youth and Young Adult Ministry (think *Songs for a Gospel People*, or the first Young Adult Kairos Conference); then, a call to First United in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, an inner-city ministry in one of the poorest neighbourhoods in Canada; next, Ryerson United, a large suburban congregation; and now, at St. Andrew’s-Wesley United, (www.standrewswesleychurch.bc.ca) the “cathedral-like” church in downtown Vancouver.

I’m a passionate preacher—whether short meditations at weekly Sunday afternoon Jazz Vespers, or full-on Sunday morning biblical, poetic, storytelling sermons, riffing on Oscar movies, science and theology, interfaith, justice, current events, or the 5W human questions (who, why, what, where, when). I love it!

I enjoy teaching—from a university setting to Naramata Centre; from youth and young adult events to the congregation; from weekend workshops to 32-week Disciple Bible studies. Because of what we have been doing at St. Andrew’s-Wesley in the field of Interfaith Dialogue and Education, we have received a \$25,000 government grant to continue our work.

I have also participated in the life of the national church in different ways—with the former Division of Mission, when on Conference staff; in “Energy from the Edges,” a gathering of those engaged in social justice ministries in the United Church; on the committee that authored the first report on the ordination of gay and lesbian people in the United Church, GC30 in 1984 (as the gay representative); and, more recently, for six years with the national Permanent Committee on Programs for Mission and Ministry.

I’ve been very fortunate to be able to travel a great deal and experience other cultures, peoples, faiths, realities. For example, I spent six weeks in an educational program with the Institute for Contextual Theology in South Africa as the system of apartheid was falling apart; I led an educational, consciousness-raising tour in Guatemala with G.A.T.E. (Global Awareness through Experience)—and continue to support such travel within the congregation; and I have just finished two months’ sabbatical in Israel and Palestine at the Tantur Ecumenical Institute.

Finally, I love being a Dad. I have three daughters from my first marriage; when that marriage ended, my former wife and I shared parenting responsibilities, week on, week off, for the next 15 years. The girls are all in their thirties, and I’m discovering the joy of grandparenting. I am now

married to the Rev. Tim Stevenson (presently a Vancouver City Councillor), and we have been partnered for 30 years.

Statement

The Canadian poet, Margaret Avison, in the opening lines of “The Swimmer’s Moment,” catches what I think is happening for the church:

For everyone
The swimmers’ moment at the whirlpool comes,
But many at that moment will not say
“This is the whirlpool, then.”
By their refusal they are saved
From the black pit, and also from contesting
The deadly rapids, and emerging in
The mysterious, and more ample, further waters.
And so their bland-blank faces turn and turn
Pale and forever on the rim of suction
They will not recognize.

The United Church has arrived at the whirlpool. Not our fault particularly, as the culture swings radically secular, when institutions of all forms are distrusted, and when religion has revealed an all too human brokenness, from Residential Schools, to sexual abuse, to virulent fundamentalism. Still...here we are, going round and round on the rim of suction...wondering what comes next. Not our fault...and yet, clearly we carry some responsibility—perhaps we have shut our eyes to the sea changes happening all around us, not sure how to respond. Sometimes I think we are simply afraid...afraid that if we do “let go” and enter the whirlpool, well, we’ll never resurface—which is understandable...and yet passing strange for a people rooted in crucifixion and resurrection.

I have a good friend, another United Church minister, who is very adept with statistics and trends regarding our church; we call him Dr. Doom. You can guess what he’s saying...numbers dwindling, membership aging, buildings starting to fall apart, finances declining. Maybe you know someone like him; maybe you know firsthand what he’s talking about. Lots of disturbing news out there; lots of black pits and deadly rapids—let’s not kid ourselves. And yet, an honest acknowledgement of what’s happening is the beginning of something new.

Perhaps we need to begin with a sense of perspective. The question of how gospel and church fit together has been with us for a long time, and institutional embodiments of the faith come and go. I have just recently returned from a three-month sabbatical in Jerusalem...a city that has been destroyed and rebuilt many times; things fall apart and come together in new ways. The theologian Phyllis Tickle calls this era the time of the “Great Emergence,” when all of Christianity is going through one of its periodic, every-500-year upheavals; it’s scary, it’s creative! A sense of history, and a longer-term perspective...this can offer hope. Our challenge is to live into this moment; not to get overwhelmed; not to be paralyzed; but to be people of hope.

One of the things I discovered on my sabbatical in Israel and Palestine, living in an ecumenical community, was how passionate I am about the United Church: edgy theology (whether it be A

Song of Faith or Evolutionary Christianity); radically inclusive (it felt good to say that we've been ordaining women since 1936; and gay and lesbian people for the past 20 years); committed to doing the work of justice and peace (it felt important to talk about our struggle to repair the relationship with our First Nations—with apology, repentance, and, hopefully, reconciliation). The United Church offers a very important voice, for the wider church and for the world, and we need to be sure that it continues to be heard.

So...trusting that we are being called into new ways of being church by God, we go forward. Our job is to listen, discern...and then to respond and act. We'll need to do various short-term "technical fixes"—selling buildings; amalgamations; sharing space. More than that, though, we'll need to explore different models of being church, and support the experiments that are already happening across the country, from storefront to home groups; from urban centres with pooled resources and multiple staff, to rural "circuit riders." Lots happening—and more to come!

But more significantly, we must discover once again what "being church" really means for us. I think we can learn from the "emerging church" movement—fusion-ecclesiology, joining evangelical energy with the demands of justice. What are the practices that sustain and shape our faith? How can "church" model a different kind of community, so that once again people will say, "See how much they love each other—I want to be part of that!"? How do we share our faith with visitors, strangers, and the community? What, frankly, is United Church evangelism? If we aren't excited about our faith, then why would anyone want to "come and see"? How do we speak to the spiritual hunger of a younger generation, people who are more interested in following Jesus than becoming church members? How do we reshape our "outreach ministry," so that people will also say, "See how much they love the world—I want to be part of that!"

Big-sounding questions, I know; however, I think a lot's going to be decided "on the ground," within congregations. The liberal mainline tradition is moving into a post-denominational reality—which is okay, as long as we recognize that being connected to something larger than just the congregation is important; I don't want us to lose the uniqueness of being "United Church". That will be one of the continuing challenges for the national church—how to be open and attentive, affirming new "nudgings of the Spirit," with the structural flexibility to support and learn from the places and communities where new ministry is flourishing.

Maybe it's because of my recent time in Jerusalem, but I keep hearing the voice of the prophet Jeremiah, who talked a lot about exile, about the whirlpool...giving up the security of doing things the way they've always been done; trusting that God travels with us no matter what happens; and that in Babylon, of all places, God will do a new thing. That's our faith...and it will lead us to the "mysterious, more ample, further waters."