# Moderator’s Sermon for the 99th Anniversary

## 100th Anniversary Kick-Off Service at Metropolitan United Church, Toronto, June 9, 2024

I have adopted the practice in recent months of describing how I show up when I preach or speak in public. Part of living into being an intentionally intercultural church is to always remain open to transformation by the presence of those not like me. Last year I was transformed by theologian Anne Kinney, whose book *My Body Is Not a Prayer Request: Disability Justice in the Church* I know many of you have read or studied across the church. I had the pleasure of taking the stage alongside Anne as a speaker at the 2023 Evolving Faith conference in Minneapolis. She described how she was physically showing up so that those who were blind or sight-impaired might have a more fulsome experience of gathering together as church. So: I am approximately 5’9” tall, although I used to be 5’10’—I think I’ve lost an inch to sitting too much at desks as an adult. I have ear-length dark brown, increasingly greying, straight hair in an asymmetrical hair cut. Chunky square-shaped glasses which, together with the church, I’m trying to discern if they’re purple, blue, or somewhere in-between.

I am wearing my alb, which I drycleaned especially for the occasion, and am wearing a beautiful stole that was expertly crafted especially for this occasion by the amazing Susie Henderson. They are on beautiful bright red backgrounds, with our United Church crest at the bottom of the right side, and the 100th Anniversary logo on the bottom left. On the right side, in yellow text are the words: Deep, Bold, Daring. *Et sur le côté gauche, se trouvent les mots: profond, dynamique et audacieuse.* Four ribbons of colour swirl down from the left shoulder over both sides of the stole. Three of the ribbons are black, white, and yellow—the other three colours of the medicine wheel. The fourth, she has incorporated fabric that symbolizes the heritage of the stole wearer. So my fourth ribbon is red with shell buttons sewn along it, to represent the button blankets of the Heiltsuk people and other coastal peoples in British Columbia.

Also, at the most recent meeting of the Pacific Mountain Regional Council, the youth council proposed a motion that the Moderator have an annual budget for vibrant flashy shoes, and the Affirm United folks in that region proposed an amendment that perhaps in order to ensure excellence in taste, that the shoes needed to pass through a Queer Eye filter. When I first became Moderator I told the youth of this church that no matter what they asked of me, if it was humanly possible, I would try and be there for them. So, knowing it was a joke, I bought myself my *own* pair of vibrant flashy shoes from the now famous East Vancouver shoe designer John Fluevog. They are low-heeled white patent crocodile-textured leather Mary Janes with orange and yellow splatters on them, violet soles that match my glasses, and an orange strap with an orange and violet buckle. Someone from the community of faith that sponsored me for ministry reached out to inform me that each pair of Fluevogs has “Sole Talk” inscribed on the soles, so when I arrived in Toronto this morning from St. John’s, NL, I grabbed them out of the closet, and they have four words inscribed on the bottom: “Watching, Listening, Signs, Wonders.” Now if those aren’t vibrant flashy shoes made for a Moderator, I don’t know what are.

I am also wearing lipstick so that those of you who might be hard of hearing have an easier time lip reading, and I preach from full text, and so can make my sermon available if that will help your hearing accessibility if you don’t catch everything. *Je parlerai principalement en anglais, avec seulement un petit peu de français. Je crois que nous prévoyons de faire traduire mon homélie en français*. And if you would like a copy for translation to other languages, we can make it available also.

I say that I was transformed by Anne Kinney—because it only takes a few minutes to show up differently for each other, to live *for* each other—and I feel like a much better Moderator, much better preacher, and much better human for starting my talks this way.

**Friends, let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your eyes. And may I never lightly presume to preach your Word and may we never lightly presume to hear your Word, for in your Word is abundant life.**

We believe in the one only living and true God, a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in [the God’s self] being and perfections; the Lord Almighty, who is love, most just in all ways, most glorious in holiness, unsearchable in wisdom, plenteous in mercy, full of compassion, and abundant in goodness and truth. We worship [Creator] in the unity of the Godhead and the mystery of the Holy Trinity, [God who is love], [the Christ, love incarnate], and the Holy Spirit, love’s power], three persons of the same substance, equal in power and glory.

These are the first words in our Articles of Faith in The United Church of Canada.

We believe that God has revealed [God’s self] in nature, in history, and in the heart of [humanity]; that [God] has been graciously pleased to make clearer revelation of [God’s self] to [people] of God who spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit; and that in the fullness of time [God] has [been] perfectly revealed in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, who is the brightness of the glory [of the Divine] and the express image of [God’s self]. We receive the Holy Scriptures of the [Hebrew texts] and New Testaments, given by inspiration of God, as containing the only infallible rule of faith and life, a faithful record of God’s gracious revelations, and as the sure witness of Christ.

We believe that the eternal, wise, holy, and loving purpose of God so embraces all events that, while the freedom of [humans] is not taken away, nor is God the author of sin, yet in [God’s] providence [God] makes all things work together in the fulfilment of [Creator’s] sovereign design and the manifestation of [God’s] glory.

Church, surely that eternal, wise, holy, and loving purpose of God *does* embrace all events—and that means that surely the Holy One, Holy Three, are here with us today as always. In this time, and in this place, as we gather together along with the denominations, communities of faith, presbyteries, and councils of the past 99 years, to count the seeds that together we have planted along the way.

L’Église est une communauté de personnes possédant des dons variés, unies par le Saint-Esprit. Nous sommes assemblés pour célébrer la présence de Dieu, pour discerner la vérité de Dieu, et pour marcher sur le chemin de Jésus. Par notre baptême, nous devenons membres de l’Église du Christ. Nous vivons cette appartenance au sein d’une confession chrétienne à laquelle nous appartenons, pour nous l’Église Unie du Canada.[[[1]](#footnote-1)](https://united-church.ca/blogs/round-table/moderators-sermon-99th-anniversary-service#_ftn1)

The church is a community of people with varied gifts, united by the Holy Spirit. We gather to celebrate God’s presence, to discern God’s truth, and to follow the way of Jesus. By our baptism we are made members of Christ’s church. We exercise this membership in the denomination to which we belong, which for us is The United Church of Canada.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Samuel Dwight Chown became the General Superintendent of the Methodist Church in Canada in 1910. He was a champion of the social gospel movement, and of church union—and later became known as the “architect of our church union.” Professors the Rev. Dr. Don Schweitzer and the Rev. Dr. HyeRan Kim-Cragg have pulled together a beautifully rich volume on the history of the first 100 years of preaching in The United Church of Canada, which is in the final process of publication. I got an advance opportunity to read the book because I wrote the foreword (it’s good to be the Moderator!), and in it, they included a sermon that Chown preached in 1912 to a Methodist gathering—and when I read this sermon, I thought, “I could basically take this sermon, and changing very little, I could preach it today and it would still be speaking to us about the changing times in which we find ourselves. Since I started my own sermon with the first three articles of our faith, I wanted to share with you an important excerpt.

Chown wrote:

At the very first meeting of the Church Union Committee I suggested that we should sit down first and decide what the Church of Christ was in the world for and do this to the satisfaction of all parties. Next, we should decide what is necessary to be believed to enable the Church to do its God-appointed work. After that we should permit all other questions to be viewed by the [people] as they might choose in the full exercise of personal liberty. I still think we shall have to approach this ideal. The idea seemed to take the Committee for a time, but soon the old creedal instinct asserted itself, and the dear brethren settled down to the formulation of a scientific creed, and I sat aside and admired their dexterity but had comparatively small interest in the result. The theology of the basis of union never caused the members of the Committee very serious concern. Matters of administration were much more difficult to handle.… The result is a good, workable creed, quite conservative in its spirit, but a creed the whole of which no one member of the Committee believes; for while each article was carried by a majority vote, no single member voted for every article of it. We have also a creed which may have as many meanings as there are people who say they believe it—which is a very happy circumstance, because it accords with the original purpose of creeds, which was not to control the faith of the individual but to express [their] untrammelled convictions.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Our gospel text this morning tells us “The hour has come for the [child of earth] to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the [Creator] will honor.”

What more beautiful expression of grains of wheat falling into the earth and dying to bear fruit, than the committee of faithful, discerning people who wrote our articles of faith? And from the prophet Isaiah: “Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth; do you not perceive it?”

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And there is no way—not in 1890, 1910, 1912, or 1925—that Chown or anyone else would really be able to predict this beautifully diverse church of deep spirituality, bold discipleship, and daring justice. That our church founders had the foresight and vision to know that we would need new expression of our faith, and that our Basis of Union would include the possibility for each generation of the church to express again its faith anew—which we did with the Statement of Faith in 1940, A New Creed in 1968, and A Song of Faith in 2006. Together we hold beliefs that may have as many meanings as there are people who say they believe…. What a beautiful tradition we have in this United and uniting church of ours.

This next year will be a time of commemoration—to recognize and honour all of the legacies of our first 100 years together as The United Church of Canada. So many, but not all, of those legacies are good. And one of the things I love about our church, the thing that makes me stand here in this pulpit today and in pulpits across the church from coast to coast to coast—as a woman, as an indigenous woman, and as the granddaughter of a residential school survivor—the thing that allows me to claim any conviction or faith at all, is expressed so perfectly in John’s Gospel. And Jesus said, “Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say: ‘[Creator], save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. [Creator], glorify your name.” Just because we are troubled by current and past circumstance is no reason to stop following in the ways of the Christ, or to stop striving to be the church in Christian community with and for each other.

I take great comfort, and I hope so will you, that never has the church fully or perfectly known how to become the revelation of God’s love for the world. Our journey has proven, both in spite and because of God’s redeeming grace, that our human tendency to sin, to oppression, to domination of the other, can never be the full expression of what is the divine intention for being in Christian community. God is always saying, “Look—I am doing a new thing! Can you not perceive it?” God is always calling us to set aside our human fallibility and make space for each other. To make space for love.

No matter what the future holds for this United Church of ours, I know that it will not be perfect. Just as the first 100 years were also not perfect. But I know the ways in which we look for God’s promise, and the ways that we come through the hard parts of life in Jesus’ footsteps, are all to the glory of God’s holy name.

And so I will end with an adaptation of part of a prayer by the late Trappist monk, Thomas Merton.

We believe that the desire to please you
does in fact please you.
And we hope we have that desire in all that we are doing.
We hope that we will never do anything apart from that desire.
And we know that if we do this you will lead us by the right road, though we may know nothing about it.
You call us—sometimes loudly, sometimes in soft whispers, to make room for love. May it be so. Amen.[[5]](#footnote-5)

—*Right Rev. Dr. Carmen Lansdowne*

1. [egliseunie.ca/wp-content/uploads/Alliance-et-accueil.pdf](https://egliseunie.ca/wp-content/uploads/Alliance-et-accueil.pdf), p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [egliseunie.ca/wp-content/uploads/Alliance-et-accueil.pdf](https://egliseunie.ca/wp-content/uploads/Alliance-et-accueil.pdf), p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Chown in Schweitzer and Kim-Cragg, Chapter 1, p. 52, in Word document pre-publication. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Chown in Schweitzer and Kim-Cragg, Chapter 1, p. 52, in Word document pre-publication. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Adaptation of “The Merton Prayer” from *Thoughts in Solitude,* 19th ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)