

REV. BRIAN CORNELIUS**Nominating Body**

Ottawa Presbytery (Montreal & Ottawa Conference)

Biographical Sketch

I was born on the shores of Lake Victoria in Kenya, East Africa, and had the childhood joy of running barefoot on African soil. Though my spirit path has taken a different route, I cherish the Christian love demonstrated by my Canadian missionary parents.

At 15, I was transplanted from the land of my birth, a change I didn't choose and didn't like. I found a way forward by engaging with an intercultural church in suburban Toronto. Sensing a call to ministry and steeped in the tradition of my birth, I enrolled at Central Pentecostal College in Saskatoon before beginning ordained ministry in Ottawa.

The practice of ministry changed me, changed me radically and set me on another path. This transformation deepened at Saint Paul's University, where I revelled in feminist, liberation, process, narrative, and creation-centred theologies. During this theological conversion, I embraced and was embraced by the United Church.

After transferring from the Pentecostal tradition, I was appointed to Northwestern United. This congregation took risks, and we experienced growth. I grew theologically, embracing the scholarship of the Jesus Seminar and Rita Nakashima Brock. I also grew spiritually as walls of self-denial crumbled. I grappled with my sexual orientation. Through the pain and gain of an intentional process that kept the well-being of our children at the fore, my ex-wife and I moved forward to reorient our lives so that, while no longer married, we still keep our vows through ongoing care for each other.

Northwestern cared for us through this reorientation. I learned the depth of grace and was grateful for a supportive presbytery, where I was elected Presbytery Chair and served as Chair of Pastoral Care and Oversight.

After 10 years of pastoral ministry at Northwestern, I was appointed Acting Executive Secretary for Montreal & Ottawa Conference, where I engaged in financial management, stewardship development, the articulation of Conference mission, and oversight in legal matters as well as congregational and ministry personnel reviews.

However, pastoral ministry beckoned, and I was called to First United in Ottawa. First had welcomed me into the United Church, and in 2005 the congregation had proactively decided to strengthen its ongoing capacity for ministry by selling their building. I provided leadership during this transition and in our subsequent ecumenical partnership. I am celebrating 10 years with this Affirming faith community that values creative worship, contemporary theological

engagement, healing ministries, and social and ecological justice, and grapples with understanding “Emergence Christianity.”

I am also “graced” to be involved with United Church finances, keeping apprised of congregational finances, being Presbytery Treasurer and on Executive, sitting on the Conference Finance Committee, and serving on the Executive and Finance Committee of the General Council.

Beyond church, I have passion for physical activity such as swimming, curling, softball, running, and spending time at the gym. I parent two university-aged children, a daughter, Haley, and a son, Logan.

I am also fascinated with narrative therapy and its relation to narrative theology. For my 50th birthday, I embarked on a narrative sojourn to the land of my birth, backpacking, mountain climbing, revelling in the spirit wisdom and life energy of East Africa, and grounding myself in the spiritual writings of Richard Rohr and Joan Chittister.

Statement

If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together. This African proverb lodged in my heart after an ecumenical conference in Juba, South Sudan. For me, this proverb echoes the spirit birthed in our church that cried *unity not uniformity* and the spirit that lives when we declare *we are not alone* and speak about *all our relations*. This spirit understands we *go farther together*.

The Comprehensive Review grapples with rapid and profound cultural and technological shifts that Phyllis Tickle identifies as the “Great Emergence.” This shifting demands the difficult yet exciting work of navigating uncharted waters and traversing unknown terrains. Awareness of our “soul work” and intentionality in our “structural work” will help us go farther together.

Our “Soul Work”

When pondering the declining membership and finances in our church, I am captivated by Richard Rohr’s image of “falling upward.” This image is a paradox. Paradox informs the Christ story and the parables of Jesus.

I embrace “falling upward” as an alternative narrative, not in naive optimism but as a theological grounding to animate our lived paradox, where we proclaim an “upward” resurrection faith that quickens the soul while graphs and charts with “falling” lines wrench at the soul. Experiences of “falling” focus the heart.

Recently, I read the novel *The Orenda* by Joseph Boyden. “The Orenda” means “life-force”. I don’t pretend to understand the depth of experience reverberating through this novel. I simply keep rereading the novel in order to learn.

Lodging within my soul are the recurring references to “heart song” and “death song.” The heart song sings the life-force by recounting the beauty of creation, the intimacy of relationships, the accomplishments in life. The death song acknowledges the strength of the life-force, which is

larger than one person yet in each person, a strength that sustains in suffering and endures across the generations.

These “songs” from another spirit tradition teach me. They reveal the soul of my own Christian story. And I hear wisdom for our United Church.

Consider the heart song. I joined the United Church because I heard a heart song in the poetics of A New Creed and the democratic processes that generated A Song of Faith. I appreciate the heart song of non-literalist approaches to scripture and doctrine. I am humbled by a heart song that apologizes, in particular to First Nations peoples for colonial attitudes and for our participation in residential schools. I revel in the heart song committed to right relations as well as social and ecological justice; that aspires to being intercultural; and that values ecumenical, interfaith, and non-religious partnerships. I celebrate a heart song that emphasizes inclusion and is open to change through a willingness to restate spirit practice and theology. The United Church’s heart song has strength and gift worth celebrating and cultivating.

Consider the death song. There are definite instances of death in our church, and we grieve a denominational past that no longer exists. Yet within these losses, dare we sing a death song that releases and even renews the life-force in our heart song? Can this death song invigorate birth happening in our church and at the edges of our church? Death and birth are paradoxically linked, a “falling upward.” The heart song informs the death song, which in turn unleashes life in the heart song.

I can’t predict our institutional future, but I have faith in the presence of an ever-rising Jesus who inspires our heart song and who walks with us. I have faith in our ability to adapt and change through a “falling” that compels us to focus on our “reason to be.” We have before and we can again. Moreover, I see in young and old alike an openness to embrace innovative ways of being and doing.

We are called to the soul work of falling upward so we can *go farther together*.

Our “Structural Work”

“Falling upward” guides our decision-making by focusing on the “upward” of mission and sustainability.

Structures hold us and connect us. We need structures, yet in the face of falling charts and graphs, we recognize our present structures are no longer sustainable and even hinder us. To *go farther together* requires proactive change for smaller yet effective governance, understanding that Jesus calls us *to serve and not to be served*. Structures serve mission. Mission is rooted in service, the service of being and acting for individual wholeness and healing as well as joining collective heart and voice to embody the gospel and vision of Christ Jesus for a compassionate and just society.

At Corner Brook and in the coming year, should remits be required, we are called to finalize our collective decisions, not begrudgingly but by allowing the Spirit to enliven us through the necessity for change. Whether we embrace directions offered through the Comprehensive

Review or make other decisions, we are called to cooperatively honour our conciliar being and the whole people of God by

- welcoming insight from all communities of faith—vibrant, transitioning, dying, and emerging
- listening to voices at the edges of our communities of faith, especially those of youth
- embracing the challenge of Truth and Reconciliation and the wisdom of our Aboriginal Ministries Council
- attending to our francophone presence as well as our regional, cultural, and linguistic differences

Our “now” responsibility is to decide.

Once we collectively decide, we are called to deliver by

- holding spiritual vitality at our core
- being clear and caring
- nurturing innovative leadership and ministries
- integrating components of varying studies and pilot projects into a cohesive whole
- acknowledging gaps and developing timely processes for the whole church to respond

Our “now” responsibility is to deliver.

Personally, I appreciate the general directions in the Comprehensive Review and I particularly support a renewed model for funding the church. The Comprehensive Review compels us to hear our heart song so that in deciding and delivering, we do our soul work and our structural work with an awareness and intentionality that understands that we *go farther together*.