

REV. JIM BALL**Nominating Body**

Hamilton Conference

Biographical Sketch

I was born on the Hamilton Mountain and raised by the shores of Lake Ontario. By the banks of the Etobicoke River, in fields and forests of play and learning, I enjoyed the best of childhoods. On nearby beaches I took off my shoes and pressed my toes deep into the cold, wet earth, standing fixed in delight and wonder. A child knows when she or he stands on holy ground.

The ability of nature to inspire was soon matched by the energy of my own inquisitiveness and wish to understand. I embraced the detached, measuring ways of a young biologist. It was a development that matched well the clear-thinking sensibilities of my Presbyterian home.

The rest of the story is exciting and routine. I played and sang my way through my teen years. I joined the United Church. My heart and mind were claimed by the open, inclusive, ecumenical idea of us. I pursued higher education in Canada and Europe, collecting three degrees at the University of Toronto (B.Sc., M.Div., M.Th.) and additional wisdom at the Ecumenical Institute in Switzerland. I became more intentionally a student of scripture and for a time served as a university T.A.

I have served in Toronto and Hamilton Conferences ever since my ordination in 1981. I have worked alongside the people of four wonderful faith communities in Richmond Hill, Caledon East, Halton Hills, and Guelph. There were urban, rural, team, and public dimensions to each one. Each was an example of healthy collaboration and mutual support. Each served a wider world. Each called out fresh creativity and growth in me. Some of the work was easy. Much of it was hard. I made mistakes. Together we were the church—worshipping, comforting, learning, feeding, sheltering. We even helped build the first key piece of Canada's national trail. It was all gift and blessing.

I have served the wider church in many roles and tasks: in committee work at presbytery and Conference levels (Christian Formation and Education and Students), in representational roles and writing tasks for General Council and the former Division of World Outreach (Ecumenism, Interfaith, and Social Justice), and in policy work at Emmanuel College in the area of continuing education (chairperson). For a decade I served as our denomination's principal voice and presence at table with other national churches in our collective conversation with the Canadian Jewish Congress. I eventually chaired that national consultation. My work and learning for the church has included travel to the Middle East, to India and Nepal, to Europe, to New York and California, and across Canada. I have also had the privilege of serving the General Council, both as a commissioner and as staff resource.

My adult life journey has been shared with Anne, who is my wife and best friend. Our children, Michael (a new graduate in law in Quebec and fully bilingual) and Sarah (a recent graduate in family studies in Guelph), are our deepest joy.

As I walked recently along the paths of the nearby forest, the ancient words again rose up: Holy, holy, holy. Some gifts never leave us. The Jesus I follow left us many, including the encouragement to live with respect in creation, to measure the fairness of life from the margins, and to trust always in our created capacity to serve.

Statement

Those who know me know that I love stories. I love listening to them. Learning from them. Growing because of them. As we all prepare for the 42nd General Council meeting in Corner Brook, the important role of stories has been on my heart and mind.

We live in story. Whether we are eight-year-olds playing pond hockey or 80-year-olds pondering end-of-life decisions, we each have a narrative we tend to live into and out of. It is a tale that interprets the events and experiences of our lives, that guides our choices, steadies us in storms, and casts our vision forward. What is yours? And what is ours together?

When it all seems too much, and sometimes is—the struggle, the losses, the closings; when we have a hard time finding serenity to accept the things we cannot change; when decisions need to be made but the clarity and confidence we would like to have before making them elude us—I believe we are invited to breathe, listen, and remember who we are as ambassadors of relationship: To focus less on graph trends and thoughtful analysis and imaginative experimental models, important though all of these things are, and more on the issues of identity, culture, and spirit that make or break any venture of change and renewal. Goals are important to set and structures important to make nimble, but our habits, assumptions, and energy will be key factors that help or hinder us on the way. To get at these we need a special kind of listening.

As we face the shadow and light of an uncertain future, I believe we are invited to remember our shaping and sustaining story. It is a story of many stories, beginning with an ancient one. The old story affirms creation's goodness and adequacy, including our own; it invites us to begin all reflection with the question "How many loaves have we?" and not waste our time focusing on what we don't have or cannot do; it reminds us that life goes better when we act on need not want; that regular rest and debt relief help everyone (Sabbath), that many voices are better than one (diversity), that circles are better than pyramids (equity), that tents are better than towers (mobility), that it is easier to turn away from external trappings than to let go our internal hunger for them (Exodus), and that we should measure life from the margins and always stand with the weak. Its pages are filled with stories that ask nothing of us (blessing, gift, and comfort) and everything of us (discipleship, wilderness rehab, and truth and reconciliation). Its stories call us to a ministry of relationship. They send us out, as we are, to meet others as they are and where they are, to open ourselves with love and vulnerability to their hurt and struggle, and in that space share a meal and healing together. I believe that identity, balance, and direction are found for us in these old tales.

I believe we are called to remember the story of our families and communities of origin, the women and men who shaped us and influence us still. We are invited to listen to our lives speak, to do our own deep spiritual work and get clearer through the support of safe community. Spiritual practices, family of origin work, and more help us identify the assumptions and habits we have inherited, including the things that trigger us, that shut down or release our better angels. For me, this remembering includes my father, his experience as an orphan, and the damage that marked him that was never discussed but everywhere felt. That he found capacity to trust enough to build relationship and a life of purpose was inspiring, and set deep in me a desire to leave no one out or behind.

I believe we are called to remember the story of surrounding community—past, present, and emerging—beginning with the peoples of the First Nations with whom we walk. This is a moment for us to make better that relationship through lived apology and meaningful reparation. We remember also the others beyond the church, diverse and good, with whom we would work on the things that challenge us all. Most are not waiting for us to change, but they do welcome our humble accompaniment. When they express hurt or healing in their coffee shop conversations and radio songs we encounter sacred story, lifted up in the language of universal human experience. It is a language we should adopt. Our remembering also extends to people seeking fairness, including the young, who offer so many gifts in a new age and who are full partners in the work of building healthier connection.

I believe we are called to remember the story of the earth, to listen to it carefully enough to understand how so many of our theologies and practices still do not look all the way to the ground; and to recall the many ways the earth teaches interdependence, mutual respect, and the need for balance and rest.

Most of all I believe that this is a time to remember that we are remembered. From before our beginnings until after our endings, we are held. There is a world that needs to hear and feel this, and rest more deeply in it, so that anxious hearts might relax, and busy accumulation slow, and an exhausted and damaged earth find healing.

To live in remembrance is not to dwell in the past but to live in relationship—back, forward, around, down, and in. Relationship is our work, and remembrance our practice of it. Lives of risk, trust, vulnerability, fairness, forgiveness, and love, shared with humility and joy, reflect our identity. Our story. We don't need much in the way of money or structure to be living it. We can be this, and offer this, anywhere. As Christ's body in the world. God's Spirit being our helper.