

REV. KAREN HILFMAN MILLSON**Nominating Body**

Living Waters Presbytery (Toronto Conference)

Biographical Sketch

I was raised by a mother with a passion for social justice and for inclusion of all people, and a father with a passion for meaningful conversations and a sense of bold vision. Their influence awakened a longing in me for community filled with respect, deep listening, authentic connections, and a capacity to see potential and possibilities.

The church played a peripheral role in my childhood. On the rare occasions we went to church I found it to be a place that excluded me and my perspectives and experiences. My most painful memory was when I was 10. I was told that my powerful sense of the light of God's love within me and in every person I met was wrong. I tried to shift to a second-hand set of beliefs, but letting go of a first-hand sense of knowing God left an aching emptiness, and I simply couldn't do it.

During university days for my degree in drama I realized I was living my life behind a facade of external expectations. At that time I rekindled connection to my authentic self. A decade later, during my internship in preparation for ministry, a spiritual director observed that most of us live our lives caught in external expectations, fear, and judgment, and the goal of the spiritual journey is to reconnect to who we are as a beloved child of God, to our true self that is the source of Wisdom and creativity within us. This familiar understanding has guided my life and ministry.

Throughout 25 years in congregational ministry in two pastoral charges (1988–2013), followed by two years as a Facilitator of Significant Conversations with congregations, I have focused on developing what I call *Circle Culture*—a safe place to explore questions, perspectives, and possibilities (www.CircleCultureInstitute.com). Otto Scharmer's Theory U confirmed what I had discovered: that if we are going to effect change we need to get past the voices of fear and judgment within us and connect to our authentic selves. When we connect in community at this level of authenticity, we move beyond entitlement and turf-protection to creative future possibilities.

My work is to provide opportunities for communities to connect to the bold vision that is seeking to emerge amongst them. Space is created through intentional spiritual and community practices for people to recognize their gifts and capacities, to clear away the clutter that is limiting potential, to discover possibilities, and to identify next steps to develop and test their ideas.

I have shared my passion in large and small ways, including Chair of Presbytery (1990); Task Group on Structures that presented a Three-Council Model to General Council (1994); Leadership Team for Orientation to Rural Ministry; consultant when Toronto Conference shifted from nine presbyteries to four (2009); leadership at all levels of the church on Creating Circle Culture; Commissioner to General Council three previous times; coordination for small group

circles at St Paul's in Orillia, with over 400 participants annually and for eight differently focused pastoral care teams with 130 volunteers; worship leader for six Conference Annual Meetings; keynote speaker; Ignatian Spiritual Exercises; leader on partnership trip to Guatemala and pilgrimage to the Holy Land; participant in international gatherings developing vision and strategies for well-being and resilience in our global community and neighbourhoods.

I am continuously grateful for the loving support of my husband Alan of 35 years, two daughters, their husbands, and three delightful grandchildren. We all live in Orillia, Ontario, a place of creative energy and ancient healing.

Statement

My vision for the church is rooted in my vision for the world. It is a dynamic vision of relationships grounded in trust and respect that animates the longing for wholeness and well-being that is stirring amongst us.

As we stand at the edge of the 10th decade of The United Church of Canada we find ourselves living in times of overwhelming disruption and amazing potential. In many ways, life as we've known it is ending. But are we dying, or might the pain and turmoil be connected to giving birth? In Isaiah's vision we are nudged by a question from God, "I am doing a new thing! Can you not see it?" We need to see the new thing God is doing. In these times when the familiar patterns and structures of our common life are radically shifting, it is critical that we as people of faith not be consumed by fear. Rather, let us see this as an opportunity for new possibilities to emerge.

In the midst of global turmoil there is also a global spiritual awakening. We see it in the blessed unrest that is gathering people together for meaningful conversations, in people seeking authentic connections and right relations, and in a longing for respectful sharing of resources that do not devastate the earth. We also see it in churches engaging new practices and perspectives.

As the church, we can more fully be part of this spiritual awakening, if we are willing. It will require us to be intentional about our inner work, clearing out attitudes that hold us in fear, despair, and limitation so that love, joy, and inspiration can guide us to a new vision. Through anticipation of new life we shift from focus on survival and fear of death of the church to focus on the new way God is calling us to. We are charged to be God's love-in-action and to see possibilities infused with hope, knowing that whatever we give energy to will grow.

Our diminishing financial and people resources provide a catalyst to reimagine how we will be church. The church of the future will likely look very different from what we are accustomed to. How exciting it is to imagine new ways of responding to the hopes and longings of the world through our message of love for everyone! The world is crying out for meaning and connection. We have the capacity to create safe places for the important conversations that need to happen in our neighbourhoods. Evolutionary efforts are being made in the world and in our churches. We need to partner with people and groups to support positive initiatives that align with our goals for community filled with deep gratitude, compassion, and wonder.

Throughout my years of ministry I have developed seven goals that reflect what I see the purpose of the church being in these times:

- 1) to engage in the awakening that is happening in the world that includes spiritual fulfillment, social justice, and environmental sustainability
- 2) to respond to the deep longing within our culture for meaningful conversations, ensuring that all voices are encouraged and safe
- 3) to intentionally respond to unmet life-needs so as to be relevant in the lives of people within and beyond our congregations
- 4) to develop gift-based ministry to enhance leadership capacity
- 5) to walk with people in times of struggle and change when they seek transformation in their lives
- 6) to help people learn to connect with their authentic self, the divine power within, and the guidance of Christ consciousness
- 7) to be radically inclusive

My repeated call in life has been to help communities tap into their own wisdom to find a way forward in times of transition. I have developed Circle Culture, which I have defined as an intentional way of being in which we

- listen deeply
- speak from our heart, mind, and experience
- trust that we have the wisdom we need within us and amongst us
- honour our own and one another's gifts
- commit to action to move toward change
- encourage, support, and be accountable to one another
- discover clarity and creativity emerging in our midst
- align with the intuitive flow of life

Circle Culture emerges as we connect to our core wisdom and creativity at the centre of our authentic selves. In my experience, the combination of all our voices speaking authentically allows the Spirit to guide us toward future possibilities we might never imagine on our own. My heart sings when I hear a radical new idea arising from an in-depth conversation where many diverse voices are represented.

I look to the future of the church with a sense of deep hope and excitement. I anticipate that out of the depth of our faith we will be led wisely to combine our resources so we can best respond to our call and purpose.

A central aspect of the work we will be doing in the coming years is developing relationships that profoundly shift the old way of interacting. We are already committed to this intention in our commitments to reconciliation with the First Peoples of Canada, to being an intercultural church, and to exploring new partnerships and networks as in the vision offered by the Comprehensive Review Task Group report. Can we risk engaging in decision-making in new ways so that more voices will be heard through consensus-building? Can we enter into relationships without the constraints of grasping for the way we have always done things? Can we commit to seek to see the light of love in everyone?

A key role of the Moderator as spiritual leader over the coming three years will be to ensure that we remain enthusiastic and led by vision rather than fear, so we stay open to creative possibilities

and be willing to be led by Spirit. Our hope is rooted in the trust that we are being called, as “United in God’s Work” says, “to participate more energetically and faithfully in God’s new creation.”