



## Season 13: Episode 8 | Kimberly Heath | How Do You Stay Spiritually Grounded in a Busy Life?

Hello and welcome to Scripture Untangled, a podcast by the Canadian Bible Society. My name is Joanna la Fleur, I'm a friend of the Canadian Bible Society and I'm going to be your guide for today's episode. Today, Kimberly Heath is in conversation with CBS Ambassador Reverend Dr. Andrew Stirling.

The Right Reverend Dr. Kimberly A. Heath is the 45th Moderator of the United Church of Canada. She was born in Lusaka, Zambia where her parents taught school, but she eventually grew up in small towns and cities across Canada. After studying history at McGill University, she earned her Master of Divinity at Emmanuel College and was ordained in 1999.

Her doctorate in ministry studies focused on preaching and particularly where it can be effective in transformation within and without in the world through small steps and minor shifts. She began her nearly three decades of active ministry with the people of Claire's Home Pastoral Charge in rural southern Alberta and since 2007 she has served the people of Wall Street United Church in Eastern Ontario. Her active ministry has led her to working within the wider church and leadership roles and she nurtures other leaders' faith through clergy retreats, workshops and preaching conferences.

She now lives in Brockville, Ontario with her husband and youngest of her four kids who are ranging from 15 to 27 years old as well as Salty the dog. She's bilingual and enjoys reading, sailing and open water swimming. Enjoy this rich conversation.

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**Andrew Stirling:** Kimberly, welcome to Scripture Untangled. I have looked forward to this for quite a while, and I have followed the trajectory of your career to becoming Moderator of the United Church and I am so delighted that you could take a time from a busy schedule to be with us.

Kimberly, you were brought up in a Christian home where your parents were serving the Lord in Zambia, and how did that influence your faith and was there something maybe unique about that background that continues to influence your ministry today?

**Kimberly Heath:** Yeah, it's a good question, Andrew. I was blessed to have wonderful parents. For my parents, Zambia was a huge part of their lives.

Their lives, everything is either before Zambia or after Zambia. It was just a short part of my life. I was born there and spent the first two years of my life there, but I don't have actual conscious memories of it, but just a sense of connection to a wider church, to the global Christian village.

Yeah, I had a wonderful growing up. I was a PK, you know, my dad being a minister for most of my life. I transitioned from being a preacher's kid to Pastor Kim, so they called me PK at my last charge and anyway, I suppose now I'm MK.

**Andrew Stirling:** Moderator Kim.

**Kimberly Heath:** So, it certainly all has influenced my life in ways that are probably mostly indescribable.

**Andrew Stirling:** In terms of your parents' ministry, what took them to Zambia? I mean, what did they do there, just as a matter of interest?

**Kimberly Heath:** Sure, so it was with the United Church of Canada. My father, previous to being ordained, was a teacher, so was my mother, and so they went as teachers and taught history and English at the Kafui High School for Boys.

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My father was ordained just before going over. There was some debate as to whether they were going to ordain him for this, because usually you're ordained into a traditional pastoral charge, but so they very much both were part of teaching in Zambia. It was an amazing experience with the United Church of Zambia.

**Andrew Stirling:** But of course, you, as you've mentioned, you received a call into the ministry of the United Church. You served in, I believe, Alberta, and of course at Wall Street United Church in Brockville, a congregation I know well. And I knew before you were the minister there, I do believe your father was the minister there, and I actually, of course, knew your father quite well.

But what led to your sense of call? And this is the Bible Society, Kimberly, so was there a Biblical story, a pericope, a passage that maybe inspired you or influenced your decision to serve the Lord in a full-time capacity?

**Kimberly Heath:** Yeah, you know, certainly growing up, I was not thinking that I would be a minister. In fact, you know, growing up, there were two things I did not want to be. One was a teacher and the other was a minister.

I think I had a sense that I wanted to follow my own path and not just, you know, follow in my parents' footsteps. I certainly had Bible passages that have held me at certain times of my life. When I was younger, a teenager, Psalm 139 was just my absolute favorite.

"You know, Lord, you have searched me and known me." So, I've had a sense of God's presence and call in my life for a lot of my life. I would say that summer camp was highly influential for me in my faith journey.

But in terms of actually becoming a minister, it was more an encounter with someone when I was in university. I was at McGill at the time and living in the Anglican Diocesan College as an upper-year student. I was studying history, worked for Parks Canada in the summertime, and at the time I thought I was going into government.

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I was bilingual, you know, good job prospects, all of that. But a friend of mine was going into ministry with, well, she wasn't a close friend, she was an acquaintance, going into ministry with the United Church. And one morning, we just kind of bumped into each other in the hallway, and she just looked at me, and she said, "Kim, I believe you are called to ministry. And I could see you, you know, waiting and doing something else. And at the age of 40, all of a sudden, realizing it," she said, "don't waste your time."

And it just kind of hit me like a lightning bolt, to be honest.

It was just like, I just had this sense like, oh, this is my call. It's not just my father's call, it's my call. And I took that seriously.

There have been times, as I say, where Scripture passages have held me tightly, Hebrews 12, 1-3, *"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us run with endurance the race that is set before us."*

Leading up to the call for moderator, a verse that was given to me that, you know, felt a little bit curious, maybe it still does, is Haggai 1.8, where it says, *Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build my house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored.* And, you know, it's one of those ones that you hold a little bit lightly.

I'm no architect. I don't know much about building houses. But, you know, I can climb a hill and bring down timber and see where the Lord leads.

**Andrew Stirling:** In that encounter with that individual and with that friend, having such an influence, and often I have found with so many people in their call to the ministry, it's the voice of one person, sometimes out of the blue, really doing this, almost like a call on the road to Damascus and a voice and here it comes. And this is what you should do and what you should be encouraging other ministers, encouraging seekers, maybe, who are themselves questioning whether or not they should go into ministry. Have you got any sort of advice for them? I mean, what would you say as Kimberly Heath to those who are considering a call into the ministry?

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**Kimberly Heath:** Yeah, you know, so I do think it's important, as you say, Andrew, to be able to see a call, to recognize call in other people.

I think it's sometimes hard for individuals to discern call in themselves. And so, when they hear it reflected, when someone says, I see this in you, it really can have significant, it can really change the trajectory of someone's life. I mean, I feel badly because I don't even remember the name of that, you know, the woman.

I think it was Linda, but I'm not positive. And yet it has been so influential for my life course to have taken this path. And certainly, I have at times, you know, encouraged someone, hey, have you considered doing this? Have you considered, you know, what do I say to people who, I think when it's a genuine call, it doesn't go away.

I think there's more than one chance. I think God will kind of nudge at you in different directions. Call isn't easy. You know, the doors won't always fly open.

In fact, I think often when you don't realize the call is real, then sometimes there are hurdles that you have to climb over, whether it's your own family saying, you know, what do you mean you're going to go into ministry? You know, you've got this other job or, you know, you're not, you wouldn't be good... There are these hurdles and then sometimes financial or you name it, but it's worth climbing over those hurdles if it's God's call, because there's nothing like it.

You know, there's nothing like a life of, you feel a life of meaning and purpose when you are walking in that call.

**Andrew Stirling:** Oh, absolutely. And that's an encouragement and I hope others will hear it from you because, you know, we're naturally serving churches and people have friends, there might be family listening today who need to hear that word of encouragement, Kimberly.

You're now, as mentioned, Moderator of the United Church and you bring to that position a deep faith, which I know, and a scholarship that deals with preaching and

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transformation. What is it, and just briefly really here, Kimberly, from your academic background, can you offer the church and what inspiration do you have, you know, for preachers today?

**Kimberly Heath:** Yeah, so trying to make that sort of always challenging to make something like this brief, but my, part of what I was interested in when I did my Doctorate of Ministry was, our congregation had a strong relationship with people in recovery from drugs and alcohol. And when I looked at the programs of Alcoholic Anonymous and when I looked at the people who were in our congregation that we were, yeah, close relationship, I saw people who had lives that had radically transformed from people who, you know, I would have called them just absolute hopeless cases.

Like I saw it with my eyes, people who went from just lives that were desperate and hopeless, to people who were transformed, people who had a sense of wholeness and life and purpose, not, you know, not necessarily all, you know, rainbows and unicorns, you know, not easy, but transformed. And so, I guess I wondered what can we learn, as Christians, we're in the business of transformation. And so, you know, with my preaching, I wanted to see what can we learn from what the program of Alcoholics Anonymous is doing to transform lives, to maybe incorporate that into my preaching and my way of doing ministry.

And so, I broke down the *12 steps* of Alcoholics Anonymous. And I mean, this wasn't all entirely my, you know, how it is, you find certain things, and it just clicks. But broke down the *12 steps* into three, which were Awareness, Reparation, sorry, Aware, Repair and Renew.

So that's the title of my dissertation was Aware, Repair, Renew, Preaching Transformation into the Mainline Church. And I kind of use it as a framework for preaching, being aware of the challenges that you are living, aware of the challenges in the world, not hiding from them. What are the small steps? So that's the, you know,

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the reparation, what steps can we take to repair, to fix, to do something about this situation.

And then renewal is so much about, I mean, God's in all of it, but so much about recognizing where God is making all things new, where the Spirit just, you know, moves and creates a new thing. So yeah, it's lots of richness there.

**Andrew Stirling:** There's a lot of richness there.

I'm going to be blatantly promotional here and show this called the *Overcomer's Bible*, which we have from the Bible Society, and which flies off the shelves, Kimberly, which deals with people who are dealing with a similar thing. And that's why I thought you'd go down the road when I talked about your dissertation, because I think it's an important message. And I think it's an important message for everyone, regardless of the position that they're in, and dealing with other family members and dealing with faith communities and churches and so on.

On another topic, though, Kimberly, in writing before you became moderator, you emphasized the need of being small, to use that phrase. And this is in reference, I think, to the broader church itself. How does that smallness look when much of the material in the world today and in the church today and on the shelves of clergy today are around church growth? And this anxiety in many congregations, particularly in mainline congregations, there's an anxiety about the absence of that growth.

So, the notion of being small, is it compatible with the desire to grow a church? Are they Biblically based? And how do you maybe on a positive note see any sort of small seeds or signs of growth and hope within the church? So, it's sort of a two part, the smallness and the blessing of that, but also the seeds of growth that might be arising.

**Kimberly Heath:** Yeah, so definitely, these are not mutually exclusive thoughts. You know, part of the sort of embracing the smallness, where God is speaking to me in that, you know, in particular, obviously, on the United Church of Canada, and we have

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a big identity, you know, the largest Protestant church in Canada, you know, it's history, it's just celebrated 100 years last year with an act of parliament.

The church has a big identity, and we're getting smaller, which is hard for us to, you know, deal with. I think we do have to get over ourselves a little bit. But being small is not mutually exclusive to growing.

You know, when you think about plants, there are life cycles, right? Sometimes, and even let's face it, pruning in the Bible is another metaphor, as much as growth is. I don't know whether it's our capitalistic society or what it is that makes us feel like we must always be getting bigger and bigger and bigger, sort of supersize me, kind of, you know. I don't think, like, that's not something that I see in the Scriptures very often.

In fact, I see so many examples of the opposite. You see Gideon, God saying, go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's land. You know, it's not, and God kept making Gideon's army smaller and smaller in order to do God's work.

You look at little David up against the big Goliath. You look at a mustard seed that is the smallest, you know, over and over.

**Andrew Stirling:** Yeah, the narrow gate, right?

**Kimberly Heath:** Yes, exactly.

Everything is small. So, I don't know why we fear that. I don't know why we fear.

I think we need to learn again the power of small. You know, again, I was referencing our 100th anniversary for the United Church. And most of the time when I, you know, preach at different churches who are celebrating anniversaries, their history is older than the United Church of Canada.

You know, they were perhaps Methodist before, they were Presbyterian, before they became a member of the United Church part of the Union in 1925. And, you know, so

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many of these congregations, they started in meeting in people's homes, with just a small group from the community meeting in homes. And as it grew, they needed a space that was larger than their home.

I don't think the critical thing is how many people you've got worshipping. It is a metric. I'm not discounting, you know, numbers.

It's not nothing, but it certainly isn't everything. And if that's where, if that's your goal, I think you've got a problem. I think the goal is faithfulness.

The goal is learning to connect with Jesus. And sometimes that means getting smaller before you can grow again.

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**Andrew Stirling:** It's a beautiful image. Interestingly enough, Kimberly, as you're probably aware, I do quite a bit of work with diaspora clergy and teaching diaspora clergy preaching.

And many of them are bi-vocational people who work in small ethnic communities all across the country. I ran into a pastor in Winnipeg just a few months ago, and he has a congregation of 25. And you talk about planting a seed and so on.

And yet his ministry is vital. It's important. He wants to learn how to preach to 25 people.

He's not thinking about 250 people. And as he said, you know, maybe I don't have the credentials or the ego or the name or whatever, but I've been called to these people to serve them in this time and to be faithful. And it was a wakeup call to me, you know, who's sort of often been around bigger churches a lot of my life.

And you realize that there's a sort of a humility there, but also a dependence on Christ and on the Holy Spirit and not on institution or size or whatever. And so, I liked what you said when you said it. And I thought at the time there was something deep in what you're saying.

You also emphasize, though, Kimberly, that this is a critical time for the church. What does the church need to address in order to be faithful to that Christ centered calling that we so aspire to?

**Kimberly Heath:** Listen, I just want to lift up what you just talked about. And, you know, one of the places in our denomination where we are seeing real growth is where migrant clergy have come to Canada and are, just as you say, are planting churches and they're growing by leaps and bounds.

And so, you know, one of the critical things that we need to do as maybe the traditional mainline church is to learn again how to do evangelism, learn again how to share the Gospel. In the United Church, one of our favorite quotes is, preach the

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Gospel at all times, use words when necessary. And it's time we learned how to use our words.

You know, actions obviously are important, but we need to, you know, all have that center of humility, an attitude of we need to learn how to do this, testimony, learning how to share what's your story and to be able to share it authentically. We've relied on education. And you know well, having a doctorate, you have a doctorate, education is hugely valuable.

But it's not everything when it comes to transforming lives, right? And so, teaching, being able to share your story, I think is so important for helping people to find their own call, their own sense of depth of faith. And I see the need in the world out there, the need is increasing, right? The need for connection, genuine connection. And where I see, like there are some youth who are returning to faith, Gen Z and younger are finding faith.

And the two things that they seem to be really interested in are churches that can articulate, connect them to the mystery and the holiness of God, connect them to something that is beyond themselves, as well as being able to address issues that they're facing today. Not sort of have our hands and heads in the sand about difficult issues that people are facing today. And so, I think all of our churches often lean one way or another.

I look at our Catholic and more evangelical churches are very good at the holiness, the mystery of God. The United Church and other mainline churches, maybe not as much. But we're good at the whole social justice that youth crave to do something about caring for the environment, about loving everyone, LGBTQ, or being able to live in a way with integrity, with our faith.

And so, if we can learn a little bit more, or learn how to share these meaningful things with people around us, it can make a real difference.

**Andrew Stirling:** Yeah, it certainly can. And you're right.

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I mean, every denomination, as we know, Kimberly, every tradition brings with it a unique perspective and a gift. I think in the Bible Society, I mean, we're at work in 240 countries. I mean, you know, the people I talk to, I'm going to be in England next week and talking to people who are involved in mission in Zambia and in Armenia and in China.

And you realize, you know, and from various traditions, Orthodox and Pentecostal and Reformed, I mean, we all do that. And so, the body of Christ, and so I want to really get to this, because I think the United Church has something unique to offer here. The body of Christ is often divided.

And the United Churches always had as part of its creed that they all may be one from the Gospel of John. And how can we, in a sense, make a contribution to the oneness in Christ when there are, as you rightly said, there are many challenges and young people are facing them, Israel, Palestine, Christian nationalism, human sexuality, denominational schisms. I mean, you could go on and on about all the things that divide us, but what can we contribute? And what should all Christians contribute to the unity that Jesus prayed for?

**Kimberly Heath:** Yeah, that's such a challenging thing right now, Andrew.

You know, I guess probably you'd agree with me that it's easier said than done, that all that hope of Jesus, that all may be one. You know, for me, part of it is needing, I think we could all use a dose of humility. We need to go deeper into our faith and into Scriptures so that we might stand with conviction where we feel we are called.

And we have to do that with some degree of humility. It's not easy. You know, I don't think any of this is easy.

You know, I think on the one hand that part of it is about recognizing that unity isn't uniformity. That again, when you look at Scriptures, it talks about all nations coming. It's not about everybody becoming identical, but somehow being united in something in God, who is bigger.

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You know, God is Creator, that if we can see ourselves as that we are not God, that God is God, that somehow it allows us to maybe relax and recognize that diversity is a blessing and a gift to different parts of the body. You know, we're a wild and crazy world. You know, there is so much diversity.

And instead of seeing that as a threat that everybody needs to become the same, if we can embrace the gifts, you know, to me, that's part of where Jesus was that I mean, even His own disciples were pretty radically different from one another. Why would He? You know, why would He choose such different? Why didn't He choose 12, you know, people of the exact same mind, but He didn't. And while I'm sure that they grew together and grew to become people, and what united them was Jesus.

And so, for me, a little bit of it is about planting seeds more than pulling weeds. At the same time that I say that, I know that at times you have to take a stand when you believe you're called to take a stand. And that's not easy.

I think you just do it with humility. You do it with prayer. And you recognize that, you know, ultimately, you could be wrong, but you have to follow your calling.

I think of the bold steps that, you know, Bonhoeffer took in Germany, in during World War Two. That wasn't easy. It wasn't the popular route.

And I think sometimes, you know, whatever, wherever you lie on it, sometimes saying what's happening in Gaza isn't right, is not an easy or popular thing to say, that this war in Iran isn't right, or isn't good, isn't God's calling. Not everybody wants to hear that. But sometimes in faith, you just have to live your faith.

We need hard feet, but soft heart, I think it was Corrie ten Boom, who used to say that hard feet and soft hearts. And the problem is, most of us have the opposite, right? So, a little bit more humility, but also the courage to step into the breach, step into those places that are unjust, that are not right. And to say, you know, lift up, what God loves most, the people of God who are suffering, who are poor, who are marginalized for all sorts of reasons, and to say, you matter, you belong.

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**Andrew Stirling:** It's a beautiful sentiment. And you're absolutely right. And I think you're correct.

The central idea, really, of humility. I mean, even when you go back, Kimberly, to the Bible and to the Council of Jerusalem, and the, you know, the conflict early on, you know, between Paul and some of the other apostles, and I mean, in the end, it required an act of the Holy Spirit, it required humility, grace, in the midst of all this, grace is sometimes sadly lacking in a lot of these things. But I have found honestly, that in my engagement now, having preached in, I can't imagine a denomination, a major one I haven't preached in or spoken to, in the last few years, you know, I am astounded at the unity that's in Christ.

But I'm also aware, as you mentioned, the Bonhoeffer moment, there is a need at times to be able to say, you know, like Luther, here I stand. And the two are not mutually exclusive. To do what you do, Kimberly, and I'm thinking now of our listeners, you have a life of devotion.

You're a busy mother, you're a spouse of a lawyer, and we have that in common as well, we have a lot of things in common. You're the leader of a denomination. Do you have any advice from the cauldron of your life to how to maintain a spiritual life in such a busy world?

**Kimberly Heath:** Yeah, well, for me, I do have to, I need to be anchored in prayer and devotion.

And you know, what helped me, I mean, I used to have this kind of life of prayer and devotion. And then we renovated our house and moved out. And then we had to move out of the rental house, we were into another place.

And I all of a sudden kind of woke up and realized that I'd lost my devotion life because I'd lost my little place with my one little chair where I sit and do that. And I had been reading *Atomic Habits*. And I can't even remember the author's name.

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But he recommended that with habits that you attach them to something that you are already doing. And I probably through prayer had this sense, why don't I connect my devotion to my morning coffee? Because I'm always going to get a morning coffee, Andrew. So that's what I do.

My first coffee of the day is my devotion time. And I make it a I'm not allowed to go, I can use my phone because most of my devotion stuff is my Bibles on my phone, my, you know, I'm reading Malcolm Geitz, *The Wilderness and the Word* right now. You know, it's also on my phone, but I'm not allowed to do news, social media, other things during that morning coffee time.

And so, you know, I believe that prepared me for this life of Moderator, because I'm traveling all over the place, I might be in a hotel or wherever, but I'm always going to get my coffee. And therefore, I'm always going to have that time of connecting, I need a time of connecting to Scripture in prayer every day, because otherwise, I just feel like the wind and the waves just batter against. I'm the kind of person who I'm a bit of a people pleaser probably is both a blessing and a curse.

But, you know, it means that I can get buffeted by what people think I ought to be doing. And so, I need that time to go deeper, and to connect in prayer to where I believe God is calling me in this day, to start new every day.

**Andrew Stirling:** Great advice for us all, Kimberly, great advice for us all, if only I was as diligent as you over my coffee.

Finally, our time is coming to a close, unfortunately, it's flown by. How can we pray for your work? I know that a lot of our people, when they listen to these podcasts, always think afterwards, you know, what should I be praying for Kimberly Heath, and her role in the ministry, but personally, what would you like us to pray for you, Kimberly?

**Kimberly Heath:** Yeah, well, I sure appreciate prayer. There's no question.

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I mean, you know, part of it is just energy for climbing that mountain and bringing down the timber to build the house. Part of it is the openness of heart and spirit to what God is calling in this time in this place. It's such a blessing, this role, Andrew.

I pinch myself on occasion because I can't quite believe that I'm in this place. And it's intense. It's a very busy role.

And whenever it gets super busy, I'm afraid that I'll miss the call, miss what it is in this moment, miss hearing the Spirit in this time, in this place, whether it's connecting with a local community of faith, or this interview, or I want to always be connected to what God is doing. And what God is wanting me to be doing in this time and place. So, there you go. Energy and connection.

**Andrew Stirling:** No higher aspiration, Kimberly, no higher aspiration. And anyway, on behalf of us all, I want to thank you, I want to assure you of my prayers and my encouragement.

And I know that all the people in the Bible Society will be in a sense cheering you on. And we're also, and I want to say this to you too, a great source of support if you need us. And in terms of resources, but also in terms of the depth of people who see a very broad church, because the Bible Society has a huge reach.

And so, feel free at any time to be in contact with us. And we're always there to support and to encourage you as well. So, God bless you.

And I wanted to let you know that we are truly grateful. And we'll hold you in our prayers. God bless you, Kimberly.

Thank you.

**Kimberly Heath:** Thank you so much, Andrew. Thank you for the Canadian Bible Society and all that you do.

I know you make a huge difference around the world. So, thank you.