

WOMEN'S

PERSPECTIVES

Editorial

By Carol Loudon



I was requested to edit an edition of Women's Perspectives on "Experienced Women Ministers" – a rather broad topic! What follows is an eclectic mix of articles (and some poetry) from women at various stages in their ministry, reflecting a variety of perspectives. Charlotte Stuart has recently retired after many years of ministry in one congregation. Heather Jones has carried out her ministry vocation in a number of different ways and places. Irene Dickson has enriched her retirement years with her wonderful gift of poetry writing. Jo-Ann Dickson writes of the experiences of women ministry graduates thirty years ago at The Presbyterian College in Montreal. Laura Hargrove, a fairly recent graduate, reflects on gender issues and the influence of other women ministers. Ferne Reeve, still in active ministry with more than twenty years of congregational ministry behind her, thinks about what she has learned over those years. Each contributor has a unique perspective, and we are thankful to them all for the ways in which they have given of their gifts in the service of The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

In This Issue...

March 2010, Issue 76

| | |
|---------------------------------------|------|
| Editorial | p. 1 |
| by Carol Loudon | |
| Yesterday is History . . . | p. 2 |
| by Charolotte Stuart | |
| Poems by Irene | p. 4 |
| by Irene Dickson | |
| Ministry as a Way of Live | p. 5 |
| by Heather Jones | |
| PC'S WOMEN OF '79 | p. 6 |
| It was the Best of Times | |
| by Jo-Ann Dickson | |
| Women Caring for Women in Ministry | p. 8 |
| by Laura Hargrove | |
| The Mystery of Ministry | p. 9 |
| by Ferne Reeve | |

Carol Loudon began her working life as a social worker in Australia. She graduated from Ewart College in 1982 and from Knox College in 1986. From 1986 – 2000 she was minister at Rogers Memorial Church in Toronto, then at Armour Heights Presbyterian as Associate Minister until her retirement in 2004.

By Charlotte Stuart



On Sunday September 20, 2009 Charlotte Stuart officially retired as minister of St. John's Presbyterian Church in the east end of Toronto. She had worked faithfully in that congregation for twenty-seven years. This is an edited version of her final sermon.

What am I supposed to say? I got all kinds of advice... that has been the great story of my life at St. John's. Plenty of constructive advice (which I hope I took) and lots of contradictions!

However as I thought about today, I kept coming back to a song sung by the Irish entertainer/singer Daniel O'Donnell at a show I attended in Montreal this summer.

He sings:
Yesterday is history
Tomorrow is a mystery
And only this moment is mine.

For St. John's, yesterday is indeed history, tomorrow is a mystery and this moment is ours.

But as I thought about this moment I realized that this moment is shaped by yesterday's history. So I would like to talk today about the twenty-seven years of history, of which I have been a part.

My first association with St. John's congregation was preaching on a Sunday at a time when they had been without a minister for fifteen months.

These were challenging times for the core of people who worshipped here, times when they were questioning their very ability to continue as a congregation.

In no time it became very clear to me that the people practiced what the prophet Micah says the Lord requires of all of us. They walked humbly with their God, they loved kindness and they sought to do justice.

Whether we like to admit it or not, congregations have cultures, and often within that culture there is a pecking order. Some people are more powerful than others. When some people speak, their opinions are more important, and eventually others see no purpose in expressing their God-given thoughts. I quickly came to realize that here at St. John's, led by their Session Clerk, that to practice the humility God requires was to ensure that each and every person and each and every person's opinion was equally respected. And so the history of the congregation in my experience is that there is no power structure. Whether you walked through the doors for the first time today, or were baptized here sixty years ago, this is your gathering of faith, this is where God wants you to feel free to express by word and action what you have been called to do or say. And I would like to tell you some very practical things that have happened because of our decision making process which does not have to go through patriarchal or matriarchal vetting.

When we wanted the preacher to be nearer the congregation we just removed three pews from the front. When we wanted to replace the carpet which was in shreds, we gave the job of picking it to three people and it was done in a month. When I came here there was a Women's Association whose members raised money, always did the refreshments and controlled the kitchen. Two years after I arrived, the women decided to disband, saying: "You have taught us that men and women should be sharing equally in doing the things we have traditionally done" and a Fellowship team of men and women was created.

Along with diminished numbers, when I came to St. John's the congregation was strapped for funds and had no reserves to fall back on. Yet there was never any question about meeting the allocation set by the National Church for the worldwide work of The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

Studying the congregational list this week I realize that because of people moving, people no longer able to attend worship, and death, as I look out on any

given Sunday there could be only twenty-two people here who were here twenty-seven years ago. This congregation may have been situated on an ever-changing corner of Broadview Avenue, but never did it lose the vision of God demanding justice in the world. That has continued as the congregation has become multi-ethnic and multi-economic in makeup. Through its involvement with Presbyterians Sharing, PWS&D, local missions and ministries, it has continued to ensure that the command to do justice is an integral part of our existence.

This is yesterday's history as I see it, and I have been nurtured by being part of it.

Tomorrow is indeed a mystery, no matter how much long or short range planning we may do.

But still this moment, today, is ours, given by God to do with as we will. Would that we would continue to walk humbly with our God, to love kindness and to seek to do justice, as those who have gone before us have done.

Charlotte Stuart first trained and worked as a deaconess in Scotland, then spent the years 1966 – 68 in Nigeria, and came to Canada in 1970. She was employed by WMS, then by the Board of World Mission, eventually graduating from Knox College and being ordained in 1981. Since that time Charlotte has served the church in a variety of different ways including being on Assembly Council and the Board of Knox College.

By Irene Dickson

someone in the night
drew pictures on the ice
a fish, a duck
a dinosaur-like bird

lines strong and white
no shading, no detail
frosted lines
reminiscent of ancient pictographs
found on clay tablets
in Egypt centuries ago.

How could nature
draw unhesitatingly half-inch
frozen ribbons
resembling hieroglyphics?

Did an artist
noted for drawing lines on clay
walk one night
into a different century
and skillfully etch
those drawings on the ice?

Rev. Irene Dickson, now living in Winnipeg, Manitoba, has been an ordained minister of The Presbyterian Church in Canada for many years. In the 1970's and 1980's she was a member of the faculty of Ewart College until its closure, and taught Biblical Studies. Many of us who are now ordained or diaconal ministers within the denomination, can bear witness to Irene's amazing ability to open the Scriptures and to encourage a love of Biblical scholarship. Now in her retirement she has worked at enriching another of her talents, that of poetry writing, and has published a book of her poems entitled "87 poems from Irene aged 87" Here are three of them, reprinted with her permission.

on shaded path by Indian River
in a secluded place, sheltered by trees
I take my walk; suddenly I am shocked
by the loud swoop of a great blue heron
settling down on the shore by the water;
on long legs like sticks, the bird steps forward
lifting each foot slowly and silently
in stately rhythm, unaware of me –
tempted, quiet, I step beside the bird;
I see the sharp-pointed bill, long neck;
spell bound by the blue-gray bird, I move closer
and step on a stick
it cracks
in fear the heron cries and flies away
with folded neck, stiff legs like a rudder
and enormous wings flapping noisily –
somehow I feel strangely, sadly bereft.

I did not have to ask, I did not even speak
I, your son, returning from that far country
had planned to beg for your forgiveness
I really and fully intended to say
I have sinned against heaven
and am not worthy to be called your son
since I have been a great burden to you
when I tried to talk, you would not let me speak
I found no need to rehearse my story
I forgot to speak words I had prepared
they completely vanished from my mind
and heart
in the loving embrace you gave
only one thing disturbing me now
is my brother, I hope he will love me too

By Heather Jones

As I was preparing to begin a new ministry, my sister and I were able to buy a house together. After a couple of years of sharing the house and observing my schedule, my sister said to me “Your ministry isn’t a job; it’s a way of life”. At some level I’ve always known that to be true, but hearing my sister articulate it, I was startled and a bit concerned. When we talk about being called to ministry, we acknowledge that somehow, what we do is different from those who work in other professions.

Reflecting on the range of ministry experiences I have had, it seems that one constant is the perspective that ministry is a way of life. I have lived the life of minister in a small town/rural two point charge. There wasn’t an office in the church, so, for the most part, I worked from my home. People dropped in or phoned when they had a question to ask or an idea to share. When I was doing grocery shopping, or pulling weeds in my garden, or coaching the novice girls’ softball team, I was still the Presbyterian Minister. It seemed that I was visible and available any time, any place, if anyone wanted to update me on a neighbour who was struggling, or find out about an upcoming church event. There was a freedom and a burden in this kind of lifestyle. I quickly learned that I didn’t need to worry about setting office hours, or making myself available to the congregations – they knew how and where to find me when they wanted me. One of the difficulties was that if I needed some time to myself, I had to leave home – to spend a day in the closest city, or get away to visit family or friends.

I have also lived the life of an overseas missionary. Most people would easily identify this type of assignment as a ‘way of life’, but in many ways it was comparable to the lifestyle I had become accustomed to in Eastern Ontario. Life as missionary was a similarly integrated experience to what I had in my first charge. Once again my home was my ‘office’. I had equipment and space to develop presentations and programs, to correspond with colleagues and supporters, and to hold small gatherings, but I also had a home that many people felt comfortable dropping in on because they wanted to chat, because they needed something to eat or drink, or, in the case of my missionary colleagues, because my space was a bit of an oasis for them. Some of the things I learned about the ministry of hospitality when I was in Eastern Ontario helped me to serve the missionaries from partner churches and faith-based organizations in Malawi.

After my time in Malawi, I was called to an associate position in a suburban area. It was while serving here that my sister observed that ministry is a ‘way of life’. I know the truth of that, but I also know that I often found myself reflecting that there often seemed to be more similarities between life in Malawi and rural ministry than there was between my two Canadian experiences of ministry. In the suburban, program-based church, I had an office that I went to. Unless I was in the one store or one restaurant closest to the church, I shopped and ate out in relative anonymity. People who wanted to get in touch with me, for the most part left a message at the church. I could take a day off and spend it in my own backyard without any thought of being interrupted. And still, a close observer recognized that ministry is ‘a way of life’.

I am left to conclude that there is something that sets ministry apart from other professions or careers. Currently I am holding a number of part-time positions, most of which are connected to the church, and for which my theological training and experience of the church are certainly beneficial, if not necessary. But as much as I appreciate the diversity of the tasks that I do, and as much as I am happy to be able to meet the need of the church for part-time and ‘interim’ workers/servants, I am not feeling, these days, that I have a ‘way of life’. I work at least as many hours each week as I did when in full-time ministry, but I haven’t found the same sense of living out my call to serve the church. As I live this ‘interim’ part of my life, I can only hope that my life and my work will serve, and that my perspective will expand enough that I can find that sense of living ‘a way of life’ that is for God and for the church.

Heather Jones was ordained in the PCC in 1992. As this article reveals, she has served the church since that time in a great variety of different ways and places. Currently she has part-time contract positions as editor of Glad Tidings, and at Armour Heights Presbyterian Church. She lives in Richmond Hill with her husband Barry and dog Buster.

PC's WOMEN OF '79

The Best of times

By Jo-Ann Dickson

These women faced many challenges even during their seminary days. Four were not only married, but had clergy spouses; one of the four was from another denomination; and two were also raising school-aged children within the social and political climate that was the Quebec of the 1970s, a setting vibrant with the spirit of Rene Levesque.

The secular world of the time was distinguished as a period of enlightenment for women. In response, Presbyterian College proved to be actively involved in the concerns of women in the 1970s by updating the curriculum to address the needs of women in ministry. One new course, "Women's Issues", was taught by a guest lecturer, Dr. Letty Cox, a therapist in sexuality. Another course, "The Church in the World", expanded its frame of reference when women's issues came to the fore to include group dynamics and

civil disobedience. This helped all Presbyterian College students to determine what to do about their plight. Montreal society lived on the cutting edge of change. This, together with a conference entitled "The Marginal and the Prophetic", served as catalysts to spark the women's interest in their role in the world.

The timing of the conference was crucial since it immediately preceded interviews with the graduating Presbyterian College students. These interviews were conducted by the Superintendents of Missions, personnel of the Board of World Mission in Canada. All of the graduates found themselves faced with an outdated system of Ordained Missionary appointments that had the potential to discriminate against women at this time because it did not provide adequately for clergy couples. Historically, the system had been created to address the issue of "winter supply for student mission field." [A&P 1986 p. 462] At this point in time, however, difficulties arose when female graduates could be sent to areas at a distance from their spouses or

The year was 1979; the place Montreal. Located within the McGill Campus was The Presbyterian College which in 1979 would graduate six women, the largest number of women ever to graduate in any year from The Presbyterian College. When these women graduated thirty years ago, they would follow in the footsteps of just twenty-six women who had previously been ordained to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament in The Presbyterian Church in Canada. Today they can all look back and reflect on the challenges faced both during their time at seminary as well as in their various calls.

Of graduation day, one of the women writes: "there was a flip-flop of emotions between excitement and fear. It was hard to believe that graduation day had arrived and that in just a couple of weeks I would be making the transition to ordained ministry. With three children in different schools and a clergy spouse, organization was endless. On looking back, it is a happy blur."

PC's WOMEN OF '79

The Best of times (cont)

where their spouses might not find suitable employment. And so frustrations were vented at a meeting of Presbyterian College students, professors and Superintendents of Missions. It also became apparent at that time that not all Superintendents were willing to receive women in their areas.

The following comments from male ministers, Church Office personnel, committee members and male congregants reveal the many variables that were still stumbling blocks to appointing women, and were decidedly discriminatory against women:

“You are a problem to place because you are female, married, have children and were divorced.”

“Why do you want to be ordained anyway? Wouldn't you be happier at home with your family?”

“If you really want to be ordained, have your husband resign his church and take his job, and be ordained that way.”

“How would it be if we appointed you to the same church as your husband? You could keep house, and take care of the church when your husband is on a continuing education programme. Maybe you could even be an Interim-Moderator sometime.”

As the comments reveal, it was not just the Ordained Missionary system that was the problem. The Church still had not fully embraced the decision to ordain women which had been enacted some thirteen years before. The time was ripe to challenge both the Ordained Missionary system of appointments and discrimination against women in The Presbyterian Church in Canada. The Class of '79 did just that, and brought its concerns to the wider Church by means of a telegram sent to the Superintendents of Missions, and even by overturning General Assembly.

Alas, the time came for the women to accept their Ordained Missionary appointments. Only two women of

this 1979 class did so. One was immediately challenged with these words from a male congregant: “we don't know how the congregation is going to feel about a woman minister, but okay, [you] can come.

We'll give [you] a chance to prove [your]self and go from there.” And ‘prove’ herself she did - from ashes to redesign; from church building to church family. On arriving at her charge, the female minister was confronted not only by a church in a ‘depressed’ area of a large Canadian city, but one that had lost its grand old sanctuary (1860) and Cassavant organ to fire two years previously. This church had to decide whether to rebuild, or renovate and redesign its Christian Education structure across the street where worship was presently being conducted. When the minister left eight years later, the redesigned Christian Education structure meshed more intimately with its neighbourhood, which that church had learned to serve in a variety of ways. The congregation grew, and became more inclusive, welcoming people from all walks of life. New leaders were trained, and new programs provided for a variety of needs. With each challenge faced, the congregation “became the Church” in that place. Under female leadership, this church literally rose from the ashes within an eight year ministry.

This class refocused the Church's attention on the challenges involved in gaining acceptance as a female minister of Word and Sacrament, and being perceived as “competent to do the job.” Yet, one states of the journey: [I was] “not in ministry alone. I received support, encouragement, guidance and advice from other clergy and from specific individuals in each congregation served, where through them, God's grace was revealed.”

The six women have served the church well. Their calls have included single and multiple-point charges, administration, consultancy, co-pastoring, and interim-ministry. Even as ‘retirees’, they continue to minister within The Presbyterian Church in Canada today, fully expressing the gifts they have been given.

This article by Jo-Ann Dickson is an excerpt from her MTS thesis (May 2008) Jo-Ann does research on women in ministry, and is a member of the History Committee of The PCC. She serves as pulpit supply when there are vacancies and during the summer, and as a retiree she enjoys reading, playing Scrabble, gardening, biking and golfing.

By Laura Hargrove

I have been rather ambivalent about writing an article about women mentoring other women in ministry. It has been, after all, over 40 years since the ordination of women within The Presbyterian Church in Canada and prior to 1967 (and since) women served in many capacities, ordained or not.

When I was growing up I was told that girls could be anything – just look at Indira Gandhi and Golda Meier! Yet, at the same time, a teacher told us that at recess girls could play in the covered area playing hopscotch and skipping and “Mother, may I?” and such like but we were not to bother the boys when they were doing important things like playing soccer (!). These mixed messages continue to come to us in one way or another. While I knew that in theory women could be anything they wanted, I did not meet a woman who was a congregational minister until I was 18 years of age. I knew women elders and had met missionaries Arlene Randall (Onuhua), Pauline Brown and Joy Randall. In addition, I had attended workshops led by Ivy Howard, BC WMS Synodical Area Educational Consultant. All these people impressed me as smart, capable and faithful servants of God. And yet, I worshipped in a congregation where many did not think it proper for women to be ministers.

I experienced a call to ministry while in my late teens and male ministers in my life were supportive. Still, it was hard to discern this call without role models. Guidance Conferences in the 1980s assigned follow-up counsellors and I was blessed to have Lorna Raper as my follow up. She was diligent in writing me as I discerned my calling and where I fit into God’s world. Sometimes I even wrote back! Carol Loudon in Toronto took me out to lunch, listened to my rants and helped me follow God’s leading over several years. Elizabeth Forrester has been a friend for decades providing valuable encouragement, feedback and critique. There are many women elders who have supported me in learning the culture of Presbytery meetings. The prayers and friendship of these women has been a blessing and a gift.

It is hard for me to know the almost total rejection some women experienced during the early years of the ordination of women. And yet, for me, there have been small moments of rejection – hurtful, disorienting, and confusing to one who has faithfully desired to answer God’s call to

serve. It has been helpful to me to talk with other women in the church. Not all I have met have become friends. And this is hardly surprising – women ministers are as diverse as another other group of ministers. But the experiences of my mentors have provided helpful guidance.

I confess that I am ambivalent to Women in Ministry Lunches. I am sure 40 years ago they were an important opportunity for supportive relationships. But I wonder if they have outlived that function and become merely exclusive? I have gathered for meals that I have enjoyed enormously. And I have attended lunches where I have wondered who of us was from another planet? What has been most helpful to me as I have listened for God’s leading is not the large gatherings but rather the one-on-one contacts; cups of tea with the Anglican Priest(ess!), the United Church minister down the road, emails, lunches, letters and books given generously by elders, teaching and ruling, as we seek to serve our Lord as women in the church.

Our church is very diverse – theologically, culturally, geographically, and chronologically. For some of us, most of the time, gender is irrelevant to our functioning as professionals in the world. And yet many women in ministry continue to feel they are pioneering. It is very lonely when you feel you are the only one! For this reason, it remains important for women in ministry to look out for one another. And so, while I generally avoid gatherings that are gender exclusive, I keep an eye open for women who are being called into ministry. Perhaps a cup of coffee and a listening ear or an email contact or a smile at Synod are the beginning of a friendship, a supportive relationship or even an answer to prayer. I would bless others even as I have been blessed.

Laura Hargrove was born in Port Alberni, B.C. and since 2005 has been minister at Knox Presbyterian Church in that town. In her life between she graduated from UBC in 1988, worked and traveled, and attended VST and Knox College (M.Div. 2005) Currently she is Clerk of Vancouver Island Presbytery and in her leisure moments enjoys making jam, gardening, handcrafts and walking dog Ginger.

By Ferne Reeve

It is a surprise to me that I am coming up on 24 years of ordination this May. I remember way back in 1986 talking to ministers with 10, 15 or even 20 years experience. They seemed so old. Many of them were wise. It is a shock for me to find myself in their shoes, especially since I don't feel as old as they seemed and wisdom feels elusive. Yet enough years have rolled by that I am referred to as an experienced rather than a young minister.

So at this advanced age I have been asked to reflect on my years of service to the church. Having thought about this for some time now I have come to the conclusion that I have nothing to say that is new to any of you. My life has been filled with people, worship, meetings, buildings and programs in much the same way as every other minister's. For the sake of this little article, I will attempt to tie these activities together with the thread of mystery. I am thinking not of the vast universal, omnipotent, loving Mystery we serve but the practical mystery of life together. The mystery of my experience is that the privileges and aggravations are joined, that joys and sorrows come together.

For me, as for most of us, ministry has been primarily about relationships and the people who are around us. Over all, I have loved the people I have worked with in the church. They are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. They are the people I want beside me when times are tough. It has been a deep privilege to have known and worked with these wonderful people over the last 24 years.

The surprise for me has been and still is that these wonderful people have also been the biggest challenge. It has been a mystery to me how these kind and generous people could also be so hard to live and work with. The ones I want beside me in times of stress are often the ones who drive me to distraction in meetings. I know that they have found me to be equally difficult from time to time. In my opinion, these wonderful people have been the cause of pain and struggle for each other and for the church. It has been

hard for us grace-filled individuals to work together. Often I come home puzzled.

It is a mystery to me that God has created a world where we move forward only as we bump into each other. It has been a mystery to me that God's kingdom has been left in the hands of such imperfect people..

It is also mysterious to me where I have experienced the deepest privilege. Over all, beginnings have been easier

than endings. Baptisms, starting a church, saying hello, these things were more fun than saying good bye. But for me, as for many of us, the biggest privileges came through the tough times. There has been the profound privilege of walking beside people as they faced death. There has been the privilege of walking beside people as they found themselves in circumstances they didn't like or choose, finding strength to cope, and eventually to thrive. There has been the privilege of being admitted into the lives of people and families when there has been deep pain. There has been the joy of seeing new life bubble up in the most extraordinary situations. Joy has come in the strangest places.

Another puzzle comes to me in the nature of our work. Most days I look forward to getting up and getting out the door. I have considered it a privilege day by day to work with the deep parts of faith and of myself. It has been a privilege to practice the spiritual disciplines of prayer, meditation, lectio divina as part of my life's work. These things have given my life structure, meaning and hope. I expected this to be my life back in 1986.

But there have been times when these disciplines have been a burden, or ignored altogether, times when scripture has not spoken to me. There have times when I wished I was working with something I loved less. There have been times when I have wished that my work was not with the things of faith. From time to time I have wished that the spiritual disciplines were left to my spare time so they could be nurturing, instead of being the tools of my trade. It has been challenging to keep fresh and alive spirituality. Burn-out has hovered on the edge of my days from time to time, even though I love my work. The pressure to keep learning and growing spiritually has been a privilege and a joy. Sometimes there has been too much fun in my life. Joy and aggravation have come together.

And of course there were the mistakes along the way. It has been great a mystery, how creative I can be in the area of error. Just when I think I have made every mistake there is, I discover a new one.

Some days I feel that I am bursting with confidential material, material that in many instances would make such a difference, if I could share it.

The other surprise is that I have not felt my gender has made much difference for my work. I have been allowed to overwork as much as any man. I have had similar opportunities to the ones of the men around me. Sometimes I have been asked to do funerals or weddings because I am female. People have come to my church because I am female. I do not know the people who have avoided my church because I am female but I know they exist. I suspect those 2 groups even out.

Such, I assume, is the experience of many of us in ministry. As I said in the beginning, I have nothing profound to say. I live with the joy of mystery. Joy and aggravation have come together. It is a mystery that the path ahead can be such fun and so challenging at the same time.

Despite the frustrations, my hope remains that the adventure continues.

Ferne Reeve graduated from Knox College in 1986. A native of Baddeck, Cape Breton Island, she is currently minister of Trinity Presbyterian Church in York Mills, Toronto. She and her husband Dave live in Richmond Hill with their daughter Zoe. The Reeve family is bossed around constantly by their small dog Zack.

Women's Perspectives (WP) strives to keep women in touch with each other and share their theological perspectives, biblical insights, special interests, joys and concerns with the whole church. WP is published 6 times yearly. It is written by guest editors and overseen by WP Committee, in co-operation with the Women in Ministry Committee.

These committees are connected with the office of Ministry and Church Vocations, the Life and Mission Agency, The Presbyterian Church in Canada (PCC). Views expressed in WP are not necessarily endorsed by the WP Committee or the PCC.

Readers comments and contributions are welcome at womensperspectives@presbyterian.ca

For a free subscription or to view previous issues, go to www.presbyterian.ca/womensperspectives

Editorial Committee: Judee Archer Green, Joan Homewood, Sheila Lang (administrator), Pat Martin (layout), Fairlie Ritchie, Maureen Walter