

Debra Schweyer



Year Commissioned

My home congregation was the first (so far as I know) Tri-Congregational Church building, established in the 60's. I was a candidate for ministry from Hillcrest United Church, and I was commissioned by Toronto Conference of the UCC in 1983, in the first group of Diaconal Ministers to require settlement.

Program of Formation

My formation began as a child and youth in the United Church, continued at the University of Western Ontario, then continued as I attended the CCS residential program in Toronto (there was only one program then, and only 2 years!), graduating in 1983. We had a core group, field placements, and academics – which some of us did at Emmanuel College, Toronto School of Theology. My program of formation continued over the years as I took part in many educational events across the Church, and then completed a Master Theological Studies in Diaconal Ministry through St. Stephen's College accompanied by congregants, colleagues, family and friends.

I would argue that I am still in formation as a Diaconal Minister, constantly forming and reforming who I am as I learn about and participate in the life of the Church and the Community.

What called you to Diaconal Ministry?

I was called to Diaconal Ministry by two central ideals, the educational process/ method, and the struggle for justice. There was also a sense of being part of an exciting movement of women and men choosing to take up their/our ministry outside of the "established norms and practices" of the traditional Church.

Describe some of your experiences of ministry

I spent all my years in congregational ministry (until 2002) working in teams with an ordained minister. Some of those experiences were quite wonderful, some not so much! I was settled to a Team Ministry in Saskatoon, worked in the Conference office in Regina for part of a year, and served congregations in North Battleford, Calgary and Winnipeg. I have served on many committees in every court of the United Church, and Co-Chaired the Central Council of the Centre for Christian Studies as it moved from Toronto to Winnipeg.

When I began study at the CCS, I had not considered that I would be working in congregations, especially not for so many years... but each call to a new congregation felt right and needful.

As a Diaconal Minister in a Church that declared it would be balanced and have good representation on all its committees and working groups, it was sometimes a challenge to NOT be on several committees or divisions or working groups, etc. Many of us were stressed and overworked, trying to have an impact on as many decisions and directions of the Church as possible. Yet, the opportunity to have an impact on the life and work of the Church was very exciting.

Some of the best experiences I have had in ministry have been with children in worship. I remember the first time that the children in my congregation in Saskatoon were "allowed" to take communion with the adults in worship. It was a deeply moving experience for everyone present, as we explored together what it meant to do this, and talked about what it might have meant for the early worshipping community, and what it might mean for us. The children truly led everyone there in a new and fresh sharing of faith.

How I explain Diaconal Ministry to others ...

Diaconal Ministry is about education for social justice, service to a wounded and wounding

community and pastoral care undertaken with and for the world.

First, Diaconal Ministry is not for the faint of heart. It requires a great deal of patience, tolerance, humour and wisdom. There is a great deal of misunderstanding about and fear of Diaconal Ministers in the Church at large. Some of it is well deserved.... Some other is just silly. Diaconal Ministry enters one on a quest for community that honours all of life. It requires that one ask difficult questions and be prepared to struggle in the search for answers. It does not require that one have the answers, only that we be willing to engage in exploration and accompaniment.

The Art of Diakonia is in its ability to *see* differently than the world does, and further, to offer options for behaviour that will nurture divinity in all humans.

What gives you the most satisfaction, reward, sense of fulfilment from the ministry you do?

I get the most satisfaction/ energy/ excitement from the educational and political work that I do and have done. I have always enjoyed creating and leading educational programs for all age levels in congregations... pushing the edges of comfort and understanding in adults and encouraging and nurturing creativity and exploration with children and youth. For the last few years I have been teaching English as a second language with new immigrants and refugees, and spent a year working at an Adult Learning Centre as an Academic and Career Counsellor. I am now working as an English language assessor – which entails assessing communicative ability and then referring newcomers to Canada to programs that will help them meet their settlement goals (education, employment, etc.). Being part of another's learning journey is both exciting and terrifying, and still fills me with enormous energy. Every person I have met and spent time with has challenged me to see the world differently and more broadly, and to re-evaluate my actions and beliefs.

3 February 2009