



**Affirming Celebration Minute - Rev. Elizabeth Macdonald  
Thanksgiving Sunday, October 13, 2019**

It was exactly 17 years and one week ago – on October 6<sup>th</sup>, 2002 that Lynn Freeman, then Chair of Sydenham Street United Church, introduced me as the new minister and Rev Nan Hudson as my partner. Everybody started to clap! I was astonished! I am still astonished!!

On Easter Sunday 2001 when I first saw the profile of what Sydenham St was looking for in a new minister, I was struck by how closely my own skills and experience matched. When the Joint Search Committee interviewed me, I was excited. When the congregation voted to call me, I was thrilled. And through it all – I kept wondering: An Affirming congregation calling an out married lesbian minister? I kept asking God, "Really? Really?! Really!!!"

In 1981 when I started studying theology, I was married and straight. I soon discovered that several of my classmates were lesbian and gay – all wrestling with whether to come out in the Candidacy process, all fearful that someone else might out them. In the early 1980's the prospect of any congregation actually calling a minister who wasn't straight was an astonishing prospect!

My marriage had ended by the time I was ordained in 1985 and settled in southwestern Manitoba. I promptly fell in love with the vast prairie sky, the big-hearted people and the minister on the next pastoral charge . . . who just happened to be a woman. At first nobody noticed. But when the United Church released its report, *Membership, Ministry & Human Sexuality*, people started getting suspicious. I decided to leave on June 30, 1988 – just two months before General Council decided that sexual orientation should not be a barrier to ordination . . . while at the same time assuring congregations that they would always have the right to call or not call whomever they wished. I headed off to Boston for a year of graduate studies not knowing if I would ever work in the church again.

Early in 1989 I began seeking a call and was interviewed by an Affirming congregation in downtown Toronto. A dear friend of mine also applied. You might recognize her name – Sylvia Dunstan. Several of her hymns are in *Voices United*. Sylvia had been ordained in 1980 and never intended to come out. But people figured it out and then virtually ran her out of town. Sylvia got a job as a prison chaplain, but her heart was always in congregational ministry.

As a brilliant liturgist, she should have been a serious candidate but she never even got an interview. Who **did** that Affirming congregation call? A straight, white, married clergy couple. That was in 1989. All these years later in 2019 how much has changed? Doing what Sydenham Street did—calling a queer minister -is still an astonishing prospect for many Affirming Ministries!

Eventually I was called to congregation in Cambridge. I did take a few baby steps out of the closet but with the wider church still tearing itself apart over the 1988 decision I never fully come out. Thirty years ago the prospect of lay people and ministers being able to be their authentic true selves at church in ways that Sydenham Street has shown can and does happen – 30 years ago that prospect was just too astonishing!

The congregation I was called to before coming to Kingston warmly welcomed LGBTQ2S folk and offered us all safe space. Curiously it wouldn't become Affirming. It was afraid of being labeled a Gay Church and couldn't imagine what has actually happened at Sydenham Street several times – the rainbow flag on the church sign or in the sanctuary welcoming and being welcomed by folks who are not gay.

I found myself starting to wonder what it would be like to work with an Affirming congregation. Then by the grace of God, the nudging of the Holy Spirit, and the good fortune of working with Linda Hutchinson on a national church committee, I found Sydenham Street... and eventually Sydenham Street found me!

Being called by the Affirming Congregation, Sydenham Street United Church in 2002, changed my ministry ...no! changed my life...broke my life wide open, stretching me far beyond any comfort zone, enriched me far beyond any hope or dream.

But even more important – far more important – Sydenham Street United Church calling a lesbian minister and then for 14 years engaging in wide-ranging, far-reaching, faith-stretching ministry as if there was nothing astonishing about it at all – it was just who God made us to be and just what God was calling us to do together – this is such a vital, valuable witness that The United Church of Canada, other Christian denominations and faith traditions can learn from and be blessed by.

I will always be astonished and grateful that in 2002 Sydenham Street United Church had the courage and confidence to take one more step in its journey as an Affirming Ministry and call an out married lesbian minister. And I will always be astonished and grateful that in 2002 Sydenham Street United Church had the courage and confidence to take one more step in its journey as an Affirming Ministry and call an out married lesbian minister. And I will always be astonished and grateful that that minister was me!