



Unity in diversity: A parish profile

by MARGARET MARQUARDT

I was inducted as Parish Priest at St. Margaret's Cedar Cottage Anglican Church in September 1985. The parish was worshipping in the former rectory, as the church building had burnt down in 1980. This small band of people had renovated the rectory, with the help of Priest-in-Charge Fred Thirkell, and were ready to see what ministry could become; what new life could emerge.

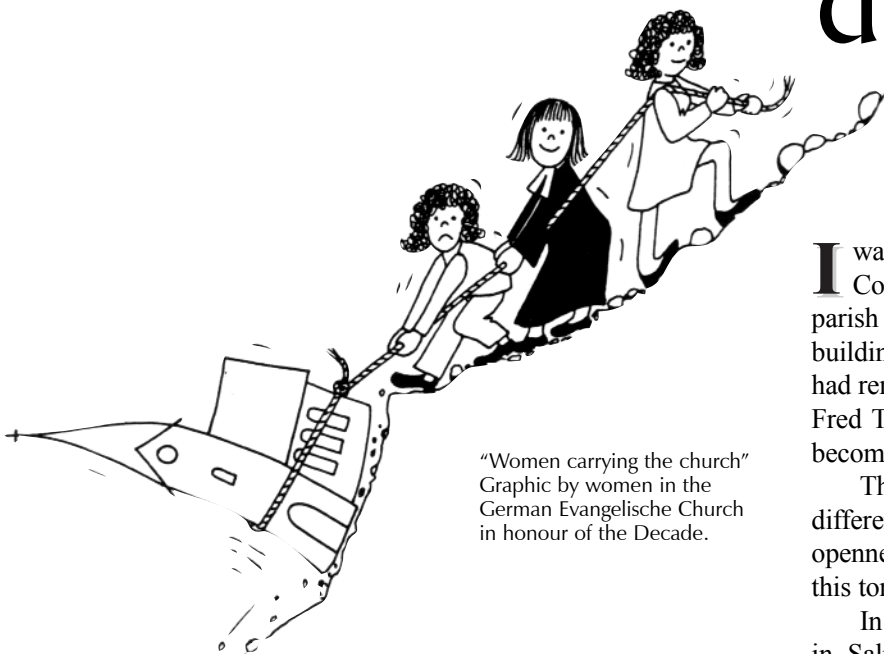
They had a strong faith and a will to try something different. It was their faithfulness to Christ, shown in an openness to possibility, that set the tone for the parish. It is this tone that still marks the parish.

In 1986, Connie Chisholm, a parishioner who now lives in Salmon Arm, commented on our move to inclusive language of people and God by saying, "Well it's not an issue for me, but I know it is for younger people." For this reason, she moved forward without complaint and with humour. She cared about people who were not in the church and why they might not be there. She was willing to listen to women speak about the importance of hearing themselves included in prayers and to participate in prayer that named God in the wonder of God's diversity. Connie was able to move beyond herself and into the realm of the other.

Today, I still hear women say that they can breathe in a liturgy that incorporates diverse images of God and a style that values and upholds them. We hope this breadth of liturgy gives life today to the young among us, to those who come as seekers, and all who find a home at St. Margaret's.

This open style includes our liturgical space, where the Altar-Table is on the same level as the chairs, bringing Altar and people closer. One younger woman, upon entering the space, later told her mother that this "leveling" was what struck her most about the life of the parish. The simplicity and colour and shape of the sacred space speaks of the theology that we seek to live into, of being drawn more closely to Christ and in Christ to one another and to our world.

Another example involves a simple way that we prepare children for their First Communion – generally ♦♦



"Women carrying the church"
Graphic by women in the
German Evangelische Church
in honour of the Decade.

On being church

In a society where we rarely live and work in the same place all our lives, the search for community, especially spiritual community, is ongoing. In this context, the World Council of Churches' call for women to consider the question of "Being Church" led us to ask folks across Canada to respond.

The first of those responses are in the pages that follow. We hope you who read these responses will feel called to contribute your own reflections, your visions and voices, on being church. For more specific questions and suggestions, please consider our challenge on page 31 of this issue.

when they are about age four. We do this on a personal basis, inviting Godparents and grandparents to participate. The child often bakes the bread with a Godparent or parent. Some children will make cards. We will have talked about the special day with the other children for a few weeks prior to the event. The service features special hymns that focus on the breaking of bread, then the child – accompanied by a parent, family member or Godparents – comes up for communion. One Godparent holds the baptism candle and another receives a First Communion candle. The child receives a special communion pin and then receives communion. It's a joy-filled time when many of us stand in awe at the openness and wonder of the child. When our own son Thomas received his First Communion last summer, his little hands – cupped with openness and respect – spoke of the hope that we all seek, to be drawn into the wonder of God's love anew.

We have been in our new church building, which we built across the street from the rectory, for six years this September. We found a partner and were also able to build housing next door for people with mental disabilities. Our physical context roots us; we're an Eastside parish in an area with a large percentage of new Canadians, many who are low income. The commitments of parishioners to their own faith journey and living this with integrity in social issues and in personal connections make our roots go deep.

We are still a small parish, with fewer than a hundred members. We struggle financially. Yet we have an interesting diversity of people who show a desire to be faithful. Because of this, while there are disagreements and misunderstandings, there is a desire to remain connected and open. And because of our size, it is relatively easy to gather people and include them in discussion and decision.

I'll use, as an example, our becoming a "Reconciling Congregation" in 1998, which means full inclusion of gay and lesbian people in the life of the church. Gay and lesbian parishioners had for some time been part of all the ministries of the parish. During the open "announcement time" in the Eucharist, people often spoke of issues concerning homosexuals, so everyone in the congregation knew that gays and lesbians were part of the parish. Therefore, any related issues that rose within the diocese were discussed by the church committee and talked about during worship.

I indicated my personal commitment for full inclusion, as I feel it's important for people to know where the Priest stands. In this way, the church leadership is showing that

nothing is hidden. I also tried to give room to those who disagreed by not pressing, and allowing for questions.

In the fall and winter of 1997-98, we held a number of meetings in the parish. The church committee invited people's reflections, questions and concerns. Gay and lesbian members told about their lives with incredible openness, without requiring that others agree. There was clearly a desire to name ourselves publicly as a supportive parish. A few parishioners were not able to be at the place of full acceptance; however, they have great respect and love for those they have known for years in the parish who are gay. When we finally made the decision to become a Reconciling Congregation, there was no one who indicated they were against this direction for the parish.

This action is just one step toward drawing the circle wide. Our job/discipleship now is to live the full inclusion. Those who have a different perspective still have it, but no one has left the parish over this issue and I haven't heard anyone being nasty or self-righteous.

It seems to me that the root of unity in diversity is based on faithfulness to Christ who unites us. *How* we do our work needs to have integrity with *what* we are seeking to accomplish. That means we must go forward in faith even with differences; we need to stay in relationship with those who are different from us.

Fundamentally, our faith leads us to make connections. As we strive to build and change systems so that they are based on respect and justice, we also need to build personal relationships within the parish which are based on mutual respect. We do blunder and hurt each other, but talking misunderstanding through and offering forgiveness goes a long way toward healing and overcoming barriers.

Our Sunday Eucharistic worship is where our life fully comes together. Community can only be built honestly in the breaking of bread, and knowing our lives to be broken and gathered together in Christ. The hard work of understanding this, and our commitment to allowing resurrected life to break in, can be described through a prayer that we often say following communion:

"Body of our body,
Soul of our soul,
Spirit of our Spirit,
You bring us to life again and again,
You nurture us in this Communion.
May we nurture each other as we become community,
and carry our gifts forth to touch the world."



Margaret Marquardt is an Anglican priest who has been ordained 21 years, 15 of these at the same parish in east Vancouver. Her parish is committed to contemporary eucharistic liturgy which nurtures and strengthens people for ministry. She has served the national church in many areas and, most recently as a member of the Eco-Justice Committee.