

**A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church
by Rev. Catherine Somerville on September 18, 2016**

**"The work had to be done. So I did it."
(Lydia Gruchy, the first woman to be ordained to ministry in
The United Church of Canada)**

Scripture: Psalm 122

It was a small reference in a journal that first caught my eye. Eighty years ago, the face of ministry changed. The United Church of Canada ordained its first woman minister. I wanted to know more, and what I discovered, surprised me.

I had been taught in school and in church that The United Church was the first denomination in Canada to ordain women. Not true. Women were ordained back in the mid 1800's by both the Salvation Army and the Methodist Church in Canada. We were quite late to the game.

I had always thought that Lydia Gruchy was a feminist, a strong campaigner for women's rights, along with Nellie McClung, Emily Murphy, Henrietta Edwards, Louise McKinney and Irene Parlby, and that Lydia Gruchy had to force her way into making the church hierarchy so uncomfortable that they acquiesced. Not true. Lydia wasn't particularly interested in ordination. She never strove to be the first. She was content to act as a lay minister and an educator to newly arrived Canadians. It turns out that it was the members of Kamsack Presbytery who pushed for her ordination. They were tired of having to travel to her isolated five point pastoral charge every time there was a request for baptism or communion, or when someone wanted to be married. It made sense to them that she should preside at the sacraments and officiate at weddings for the people in the congregations in which she served. Such sacred moments require a pastor, someone who knows the people. The pastor visits them in homes, attends the meetings, helps to organize events, and walk with their congregations through the day to day experiences that form the fabric of our lives. This person should be able to serve her congregations communion, celebrate baptisms, officiate at weddings. Kamsack Presbytery advocated on Lydia's behalf for thirteen years.

Briefly, let me tell you a bit about Lydia Gruchy. She was born just outside of Paris, France in 1894. She was the eighth of eleven children. Her mother died of diabetes when Lydia was eight. She grew particularly close to her father, and he was a strong support to her. Her brothers had immigrated to Canada first, and they homesteaded on the prairies. Eventually, they established a couple of farms in Saskatchewan. Lydia, along with three of her sisters, and their father arrived in 1913. As an immigrant she knew what it was like to sing a song in a strange land. She knew the hardships and joys migration brings. This move to Canada influenced her so profoundly that she found ways to help immigrant populations all her life.

One of the gifts that the migration experience brings to people is an ability to build bridges between different cultures and different people. Those of us who have crossed borders and

boundaries know what a powerful force that can be in our lives. Such knowledge equips us to connect with a variety of people.

Lydia trained first in office work, then she attended normal school and became a teacher. At this time on the prairies, school ran in the summer months, as the children were needed at home for planting and harvest, and the weather made travel dangerous in the winter. Lydia taught summer school in one room school houses, and each year she returned to The University of Saskatchewan. She completed her BA, and was awarded the gold medal for academic excellence.

When she had completed her studies, she decided to teach among the populations of new Canadians, in particular the Doukhobors, who had come to the west from Russia. Not only did she teach English and regular school subjects to the children, but she taught them about fitting into life in Canada. Though she never sewed herself until she was long retired and living in British Columbia, she brought Canadian patterns and material to these immigrants and encouraged them to make clothes that were more suited to Canadian life.

She was approached by the principal of St. Andrew's, the United Church's theological college in Saskatoon. There was a terrible shortage of ministers at this time. It was during the First World War. There was a significant need for people to go to new immigrants and bring the message of Christ. Lydia's brother had been enrolled in St. Andrew's but had been killed overseas. The principal, The Rev. Dr. Edmund Oliver, approached Lydia with a wild, crazy, incredible idea. If she would start theological studies and then go to the most remote areas of the prairies to bring the gospel to isolated farmers and newly arrived immigrants, the school would pay two years of her tuition.

The idea of adding a Christian message to her teaching excited Lydia so much that she said yes. She completed the Master of Divinity program, again with top marks, and she returned to rural Saskatchewan. Each Sunday, she led as many as five church services, two in the morning, two in the afternoon, and one at night. She traveled by horse and cart, and later by Model A, with a small portable organ in the back seat. Not only did she lead the worship and preach the sermons, but she had to play the hymns as well. During the week, she would visit in the neighbourhoods, going to isolated farms, teach Christian education in the schools, and offer English and adaptation classes to the new immigrants.

This work consumed her, and when you hear of her schedule, you start to understand that she didn't have a lot of time for advocating for her ordination. She was simply too busy doing the work that needed to be done.

For thirteen years, her Presbytery and Saskatchewan Conference made motions recommending her for ordination. Every barrier that those in power tried to put in the way was swept aside by Lydia's example.

The travel was too dangerous for a woman, they said. She was driving over gumbo crusted roads, and ice-covered trails.

The work was too hard for a woman. She preached and taught and worked very hard.

The level of education required by ministers was too rigorous. She did it, achieving the best marks in the class.

The people would not want a woman minister. Long pastorates in two pastoral charges said otherwise.

In 1936, at the age of 42, Lydia Gruchy was ordained by Saskatchewan Conference. Her ordination certificate showed that “white out” had to be used, to change the “hims” to “hers”. From a practical point of view, she embraced ordination, not because of a title, but because she could now be part of the United Church pension plan. After ordination, The Rev. Lydia Gruchy served at a large urban church in Moose Jaw, then she transferred to our head office in Toronto, and worked as the staff person for the women’s missionary society. Her reason for taking this job was to work so that other women who served the church all their lives, deaconesses and overseas missionaries might also receive pensions from the United Church. She also worked at the Deaconess Training School, helping to grow the leadership skills of women, whether they were called to ordination or diaconal / educational ministry.

She returned to her first love, pastoral ministry in rural Saskatchewan and served small pastoral charges until her retirement in 1962. She retired to British Columbia, to be near family, and for the next thirty years of her life, she sat on discernment boards for people inquiring about ministry, and volunteered in her home church and her neighbourhood, teaching French at a pre-school. She died kindly in her sleep in her 98th year.

Some other interesting facts: that from 1936 until Lydia retired in 1962, fifty-three other women studied theology and received their Master of Divinity degrees. Many of them could not take on the role because they were married, and in this time, women had to remain single to serve as a minister. It was only in 1965 that Lois Wilson, a married woman, could be ordained. She experienced discrimination. Some brides thought they would not be properly married if married by a woman. Her secretary kept a file for anonymous letters which contained comments like, “Can’t you do something about your hair?” and “Why don’t you go home and look after your kids?” Some people refused to receive communion from her.

One of the first ordained women served in Timmins and Matheson. The Rev. Kathleen Christopher was ordained in 1951, and many people in those areas remember her with fond admiration. The north has always been ahead of things.

Today half of the teaching staff in theological colleges is female. There are 1332 ordained women, 2173 ordained men. Add in diaconal and designated lay ministers, and the number of women serving the church is much higher. The shift has happened in theological training so that now, more women than men are enrolled, and the average age of starting out as a minister is now forty-two. People, mostly women now, are coming to the vocation as a second career.

Lydia’s story is fascinating but what I hope you will take home is how much her influence continues to flavour the church to this day. The way she led worship has become the norm. She made time for children and youth in the service. Rather than pulpit pounding sermons,

she told Bible stories with truths to live by. As a pastor, she knew the benefit of seeking out people and visiting in homes, often meeting people who were isolated and lonely, and bringing them good news. Mostly, her richest gift to the church was her unwavering focus on the work to be done. She was always matter of fact about her path to ordination, for she saw education and ordination as tools needed to support her work. Today, people like her remind us to follow the instruction contained in the epistle of James (1:22), to be doers of the word and not hearers only. We are called as Christians to make a difference in the world. We are called as Christians to support one another in loving service.

It is true that each one of us at some point, will come up against a boundary, a rule, a barrier, that we will have to decide whether to breach or not. There is always a cost to any decision to act or not, to break a boundary or stay inside it. The decision is to choose the cost that serves life to the greatest degree. When we are faced with rules and boundaries, we have to determine if the decision we make is based on love or fear. We have to consider the bigger picture... Will my decision bring more love into the world? Will it make more people feel valued and worthy? Will it allow more creativity, wisdom, excitement, joy and more blessing? Eleanor Roosevelt once said, "I have never felt that anything really mattered but the satisfaction of knowing that you stood for the things in which you believed, and had done the very best you could." At the end of the day, it is about our choices, but it is also a call to make the world a better place for all, a true community of God.

Sources Used:

With Love, Lydia: The story of Canada's First Woman Ordained Minister, by Patricia Wotton, 2012

Gathering/Pentecost 2, 2016, pages 71-88, referencing pieces by Liz Muir, Patricia Wotton, HyeRan Kim-Cragg, Monica Kilburn-Smith, Lois Wilson.