

A MOMENT IN TIME:
WESTERN FIELD-BASED DIACONAL PROGRAM

By Ken DeLisle

Every moment is unique and so history is a collection of unique moments remembered. Here's a collection of some of those moments.

In the 1980's, Betty Marlin, Diaconal Minister, was working as a staff person in the Alberta Northwest Conference when she was approached by a group of women with a question, a challenge and a hope.

Margaret (Marg) Short and Marilyn Carroll were interested in becoming diaconal ministers but were not able to move to Toronto for the 3 to 4 year course at Centre for Christian Studies (CCS). They asked Betty if there was another way.

As Betty searched out other possibilities, three other women, Kathryn Harton, Evie Gilmour and Judy Chapman, also expressed their interest. Several of the women had small children and moving them was next to impossible.

In "Diary Of The Western Field Based Diaconal Ministry Program" written by Betty Marlin and Yvonne Stewart, Betty describes the context of the United Church at the time these discussions were taken place.

"During both the 1970's and the 1980's, the church had

reflected long and hard on its mandate of ministry in the United Church of Canada . There were conversations about new models for ministry to serve a changing church and world, discussions about the role of ordered and lay ministry and talk of different educational models to meet the needs of both the church and those who felt called to ministry. Reports such as the "Learned Ministry" series and "Project: Ministry Revisited" were circulated throughout the Ministry Personnel and Education networks of the church. These documents addressed proposed options for theological education for ministry that took into consideration traditional residential models and field-based models for both diaconal and ordained ministry persons. The increasing numbers of "second" and "third career" people entering study for ministry, the ministry of the whole people of God and the distinctive roles of diaconal and ordained ministers were all addressed in these study documents. A consultation sponsored by the Committee on Theological Education for Ministry in September of 1982 explored the need for different options for preparation for diaconal ministry. It was felt, at that time, that there was a need for people to have an opportunity to prepare for diaconal ministry without having to go to Toronto to study at the Centre for Christian Studies. It was agreed at that consultation that the church and the Centre for Christian Studies would begin to think about dispersed educational possibilities."

By 1987, the National Church was learning from the Ontario/Quebec Native Ministries Consultation other ways of preparing for professional ministry. That year, the Committee on Theological Education for Ministry approved the idea of a five year field based ministry

model involving the Centre for Christian Studies.

Betty Marlin and Dorothy Naylor, Diaconal Minister, approached the CCS Principal, Gwyn Griffith, about creating a program where students could remain in their home town and still get the required courses and training.

The University of Winnipeg and St. Andrew's College were considered possible partners. St. Stephen's College, a part of the University of Alberta, was also approached for input.

On March 4, 1988, CCS and interested parties from Alberta and Northwest Conference presented a satellite project to the Committee on Theological Education for Ministry which involved St. Stephen's as partner.

However, the National Church did not accept the proposal from CCS, as it did not believe CCS had sufficient funds. Instead, in September of that year, the CTEM appointed St. Stephen's College, to run the program. When all was approved, the College hired Betty Marlin as Facilitator.

Officially referred to as the Western Field-Based Diaconal Program, it had students from as far away as Ottawa and Victoria, but most were from Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

It began in 1989 at King's Fold Retreat and Renewal Centre on the banks of the Ghost River, Alberta, with about 30 interested women – and men.

It was to have one intake only but the demands and interest were so high, that a second intake was approved for 1991. Yvonne Stewart was added as a Co-ordinator to work with Betty Marlin.

It was a five-year program in which students worked in a church or community outreach setting in their home city, usually part-time. These field placements were often a challenge but a rich source of learning.

Irene Rainey, class of 1991, shares her experience. *"One of the most significant aspects of the training for me revolved around the field-based requirement. The expectation was that we would be working in Paid-Accountable-Ministry and studying at the same time. This provided a wealth of built in support and challenge that greatly enhanced and deepened my learning as the action-reflection model became my daily reality. The list of individuals and groups with whom we were required to reflect on a regular basis included learning partners, learning facilitators and lay facilitation teams from the local area as well as the Coordinators of the program.*

Each of these individuals and groups offered feedback from their varying perspectives on the leadership initiatives and skills that they saw me demonstrating. In addition, they regularly raised challenging questions and offered helpful suggestions. I still remember clearly the day that I received Yvonne Stewart's (the Coordinator working with me at the time) response to my first journal summary after being appointed to a new position in a rural pastoral charge.

The pastoral charge was undergoing major transition and I was extremely anxious about my lack of experience as I encountered new and challenging problems. Yvonne's response included not only feedback on my questions and reflections but also a whole packet of helpful resources. What a gift that was to me and to the pastoral charge which benefitted from the experiences into which those resources led us."

Students gathered as a full community three times in a year. Two of these gatherings were for one week each, focusing on a different area of ministry. The third and final session each year was two weeks in length and expanded further on the areas introduced in the previous two one-week sessions.

There was also an additional week long regional gathering which varied greatly with each regional cluster having the responsibility to plan and resource their own gathering after setting goals and objectives that met with the approval of the Program Coordinators.

The program also required a two week global exposure experience of living the gospel in a different culture. The first group chose Cuba and the second group chose Korea.

In addition they were required to meet monthly with learning partners, learning facilitators and on-site facilitation teams in their home and ministry settings.

Other required courses were taken from various theological colleges (such as the Vancouver School of Theology, St. Andrew's University, the University of Winnipeg, CCS) either in class, or by correspondence.

Ruth Cairns, class of 1991, recalls, *"An important plus for me was the great variety of speakers available at St. Stephens and St. Andrews when we were there; such as: Carter Heyward, Bruce Miller and John Dominic Crossan at St. Stephens and Bishop Spong and Walter Wink at St. Andrews. Also the "Third World Experience" that was mandatory; we went to South Korea for an amazing experience."*

Participants could receive a diploma, a Bachelor of Theology or a Masters in Theological Studies. They could remain as lay folk or chose to be Commissioned to Diaconal Ministry in the United Church of Canada.

A key to the program was the community learning style used.

Anne Duncan, class of 1991, shares her experience. *"Before the program my experience in less traditional educational styles was very limited. However, the Western Field-Based program, with its emphasis on learning in community and that we are all teachers and all learners, was very exciting and enriching—both to my education then and the way in which I have been in the world since.*

Working with colleagues on projects for the program, on academic assignments, on a joint thesis and with members in congregations on various projects, I have witnessed a depth and richness to the tasks which could never have been achieved when working alone. It was a blessing to participate in the program--a privilege for which I continue to be extremely thankful."

In wasn't all seriousness and heavy work. There were

moments of humour as well.

Yvonne Stewart shares two highlights from her time in the program.

"Two incidents related to those courses stand out in my mind – neither of them 'academic.'

Towards the end of their program, the folks in the first intake were preparing for their final interviews. They expected to be asked if they were in essential agreement with the Basis of Union. To learn the Articles of Faith, we played charades – a unique and entertaining approach! The second intake group met in Vancouver for a social justice unit.

As part of our course, we walked through the lower east side late one night talking to sex workers, addicts and neighbourhood residents, visiting sex shops and bars. Kim Horwood commented on how embarrassing it was at first going into a sex shop and examining the merchandise with a 'teacher.'"

As well, there were times when students and staff had disagreements. Learning to deal with these tensions were also learning moments.

Yvonne Stewart recalls, *"I was impressed to learn that a global exposure trip was an essential part of the program requirements – but also surprised that there was resistance from a few participants – to the point of going to the Coordinating Committee to ask for a change – which they refused to make.*

In the end, all who travelled to Cuba – the only trip I was part of – found the experience of living in another culture in much the same circumstances as its citizens was an invaluable and challenging experience which elicited new insights into our own culture and how it was perceived from the outside and a sense of solidarity with those who deal with dramatically different life circumstances.”

One of the other interesting aspects of the training were the gender issues. Diaconal ministry was and is predominately filled by women but men have also chosen to enter this field.

What was it like for the men involved?

The first intake in 1989 started with 5 men and 2 completed the work. Allan Gairns was in the 1991 intake and offers this reflection.

“What impressed me about the Western Field Based Diaconal Program (WFBDP) was the amount of work and living we did in community and the role gender plays in our understanding of the world and how it affects our world view.

As one of three male students at the start of the 91’ intake and then the last remaining male in the class after 5 years, I found myself seeing things a little differently, a lot of the times, from my classmates. There was a strong feminist influence present a lot of the times and when my approach to an issue seemed to echo a traditional male attitude I felt strong resistance. But, in a caring community as we had in the WFDP I was not alone in facing this challenge. In the end this tested my ability to take a stand on important issues and affirmed myself

as an individual living and working in community.”

Each group had about 20 students complete the program.

For the students in the 1989 group, their graduating class included Mary Dodd and Marg Short, who both died during their studies. Marg, one of the women who first approached Betty Marlin about starting a program, was one course short of completion when she died of cancer.

All the students shared unique experiences and learning that helped them discover who they were; how they work and continue using the skills learned long ago.

“I, also, came to realize that I am a person who is an introvert that becomes an extrovert when performing certain functions. I can only take so much time amongst a population and then need to be alone.

This learning has helped me structure and manage my time between work (ministry) and personal life.” (Allan Gairns)

“Looking back on the five year Western Field Based Diaconal program begun more than 20 years ago, I am very aware of how transformative that program was for me and how it continues to influence my life. It was a major culture shift which introduced me to a different way of viewing relationships and education through the use of tools and resources which, among other things, identified personality types, learning styles and the roles played in group dynamics.

As I saw myself from this new vantage point, I also

began to see others differently.

As this perspective has continued to evolve I find it possible to have an appreciation for, and understanding of, how and why we do what we do.

That was certainly true for me in being in ministry in two different team ministries.

In the first my team mate's personality was completely opposite to mine. In the second we were the same personality type.

I believe that understanding personality types was a helpful contributor to being able to minister in team ministry in a very positive way. " (Anne Duncan)

Irene Rainey remembers learning about the power that comes from being a minister.

"While I was fortunate enough to acquire paid-accountability positions to fulfil most of my field work requirements, I completed one segment as a volunteer in a local congregation.

This was the experience that revealed to me most clearly the power that is lodged in the ministerial role.

In that setting, although my leadership was accepted and appreciated, it gradually became clear to me that I was not being granted either the authority or the trust that I received in the settings where I was seen as a 'minister'.

Reflecting on this phenomenon with my various support groups led to significant learning for all of us about the power dynamics inherent in pastoral relationships and the ethical issues and responsibilities that need to be understood and respected. Theory and theology came to life in some new and deeper ways for us all through this experience."

Gerry Scharff, a graduate of the first intake states, *"The Diaconal Program was life changing for me and I continue to use skills learned and to connect with a few folks who have become lifelong friends. Sometimes I wish I was 30 years younger and could take the courses being offered now.*

I know I would have a new approach to learning and much more confidence."

Because it was a learning community, staff also made discoveries about themselves.

"I joined the Western Field-Based Diaconal Ministry Program with the second intake of folk preparing for diaconal ministry.

Betty Marlin and the Coordinating Committee had done a fine job of setting up all the appropriate structures which I was able to slip right into. Participants were grouped into roughly geographical clusters so that they could work together and provide support for each other in between courses.

I connected with the Calgary cluster from the first intake and the central Alberta area and Winnipeg and northern Ontario clusters from the second.

It was a privilege to reflect with each person through their journal writing, to learn and laugh with the cluster groups, to meet with their caring and capable supervisors, and to support committed facilitators and facilitation groups.

All participants in the program travelled a lot. Betty and I visited all the pastoral charges or social ministries in which participants worked - to see the program in action as it were- and to connect with supervisors, facilitators and committees. All of us moved about for our

residential courses – to Winnipeg, Calgary, Saskatoon, Vancouver, Fort Qu'Appelle and more.

We really got to know one another in these residential settings. Betty and I met with each participant with whom we formally related during this time together. I quickly learned that early morning and late night consultations were not my style. Betty seemed able to go on forever.

Snack food served as the fuel and the glue that kept us going. I remember Linda Hunter saying that jeans seemed to get shorter and shorter as waists got wider and wider over the one or two weeks. (Yvonne Stewart, Co-ordinator)

The program was evaluated at its completion and shared with the wider United Church. The experience of this curriculum, along with that of the First Nations Schools, influenced the field-based program now running out of CCS.

Yvonne Stewart shares her personal evaluation.

"I attended Alberta & Northwest Conference when the first intake group was going forward for commissioning in the spring of 1994. Their speeches to the Conference exuded confidence and maturity. Each candidate spoke well demonstrating sound theological knowledge and solid practical experience in accountable ministry.

Candidates in other Conferences and from the second group spoke as capably, I'm sure.

Finally, I gratefully participated in the convocations at St. Stephen's College of both groups in 1994 and 1996 to celebrate their hard work, intense learning and skillful ministry.

These events marked the culmination of a rewarding relationship with St. Stephen's College, the Western Field-Based Diaconal Ministry Program, Betty Marlin who did such outstanding work and these well equipped diaconal ministers."

Many of the graduates of the program have served on CCS committees and Central Council and CCS amended its definition of "Friend of the Centre" to include graduates of the Western Field-Based Diaconal Program. Betty Marlin and Ken DeLisle, class of 1989, were named Companions of the Center in 2006 and 2008 respectively. Dorothy Naylor who helped Betty in the beginning of the program, was named a Companion in 2009.

These were moments to treasure and to say thanks.

Resources:

Email and correspondence from Betty Marlin
Email from Ruth Cairns, Anne Duncan, Irene Rainey, and Yvonne Stewart.

Simonson, Gail. *Ever-Widening Circles: A History of St. Stephen's College*. Edmonton: St. Stephen's College, January 2008.

Stewart, Yvonne and Betty Marlin, with support and guidance from the Coordinating Committee, *Diary Of The Western Field Based Diaconal Ministry Program: A pilot project of St. Stephen's College and the Committee on Theological Education for Ministry in The United Church of Canada, September 1989 to June 1996, July 1996.*