

Jean Stairs settles into Acton parish

People seek sincerity - pastor

The sixth woman to be ordained in the history of the Baptist Convention of Ontario and Quebec is the pastor of the Acton Baptist Church on Mill Street.

Rev. Jean Stairs, 28, is looking forward to her ordination in October. Following Baptist custom, ministers aren't ordained until they gain experience in a parish.

Young and enthusiastic, Rev. Stairs landed her job after working as a supply preacher for the Acton congregation in the spring of 1981. When the parish realized she had finished school and was available as a pastor, they contacted her to come and fill their empty pulpit.

Overall, there are under a dozen Baptist women clergy throughout Canada, Rev. Stairs said. "Churches aren't being encouraged by our Baptist structure to look out for the women who are coming through. They aren't often aware that they (women) are training and are available, qualified and competent," she said. "Though I think now they are beginning to realize it."

A graduate of the master of divinity program at McMaster University in Hamilton, Rev. Stairs said there were five women and 14 men in her seminary class. Of the five graduates from the course in her year, she was the sole woman.

Finding a job once you

graduate is really tough in the Baptist structure even for men, Rev. Stairs complained. Because the Baptist church believes in the autonomy of the local church, it doesn't place new graduates in churches. Finding a parish is left up to the young graduate, and finding a minister is up to the churches.

TWO GROUPS
Although there exists a churches' and pastors' advisory committee acting as a liaison service between the two groups, it's still very much up to the individuals and churches involved.

This set-up contrasts with the United Church of Canada, where new ministers are automatically posted in a pastoral charge when they graduate.

Having to hustle for your first pastoring job can be even harder when you're a woman, Rev. Stairs indicated, because although intellectually people feel it's an acceptable idea to have women pastors, emotionally, because of tradition and other factors, often they're not ready to be pastored by a woman.

"This church is unique because it has lots of women in leadership roles," Rev. Stairs said, sweeping her eyes over the wooden pews. "A lot of the women are working women and the body of people are open generally to changing patterns and are therefore more accepting towards a

woman pastor."

WELL LIKED
She said she tries to have a place for everyone in her ministry, and feels well liked by the congregation.

They would a male minister, with the exception that some worry about me in a way that they might not if I were male."
FEEL ACCEPTED
She said she also feels

Anybody who walks into a new job has difficult things to handle and Rev. Stairs doesn't feel that she found things any more difficult because of her sex.

Besides visiting the retired and sick, Rev. Stairs makes trips to lunch with her working parishioners as well.

"Men generally, even when the minister is male, are not inclined to come to the minister for help. They'll come over business or administrative issues, but in terms of their own life, marital or mid-life problems, they're not inclined to," she said. "The men who aren't as open about these issues, I tend to seek out more and go visit them at home or meet at their work."

Pastoring the children in the congregation is a source of joy for Rev. Stairs. She said being

female may give her greater sensitivity as to what's important to children and how to help them through grief and loss.

The fact she's single and attractive worries her Acton congregation, Rev. Stairs admitted. "They're afraid I'll get married and go away." However, even if she were to marry, Rev. Stairs doesn't see herself giving up her vocation. She said she would continue to pastor.

"We're the models, the pioneers for the women coming out of the seminaries now," she said.

The first woman ordained a Baptist minister was Muriel Carder in the 1930s. It wasn't until 1945 that a second, Clareholm Stewart, was ordained. Although very slowly, the number of Baptist women clergy is growing.



Jean Stairs considers herself lucky to have been invited to pastor at Acton's Baptist Church. The bright young woman graduated last year from McMaster University's Divinity College and says because the Baptist church believes in the autonomy of the local church, it makes finding a parish tougher for the new graduate. Finding a parish is up to graduates, whereas in the United Church, ministers are automatically posted in a pastoral charge when they graduate.

(Herald photos by Ani Pederian)

Couples weren't sure if Lynne Bandy could legally marry them

Judging on merits, not sex

The petite Lynne Bandy has had to assure couples on more than one occasion that if she performed their wedding it would be legal.

Rev. Bandy, 29, was ordained by the United Church of Canada in 1977. She practised as a minister until moving to Georgetown last fall, when her minister husband Tom accepted a position with the Ballinafad and St. Andrew's United Churches in Halkon Hills.

Friendly, with an easy manner that makes you warm right up, Rev. Bandy is using her personal skills to advantage again. Since March 1 she's been working as pastoral assistant at Lansing United Church in Willowdale.

"Willowdale is the first church where I haven't been mistaken for the minister's wife, niece or daughter. It's really refreshing not to have to face that," she chuckled. Rev. Bandy works three days a week at the church and feels very much accepted by the congregation.

The ministerial couple moved to Georgetown after working four churches together in New York state, following their marriage. Before that, Rev. Bandy ran a three-point pastoral charge in rural Manitoba for a year on her own.

"A number of my parishioners were customs officials, which made crossing the border easy," she laughed.

SMALL TOWN
Her term at Emerson, Manitoba, a small town near the Minnesota and North Dakota borders, followed her three years at the University of Toronto's Emmanuel College seminary.

As part of her training, Rev. Bandy worked one summer in a northern Saskatchewan parish and another in downtown Toronto. She holds Bachelor of Arts and Master of Divinity degrees from the University of Toronto.

"In my year of seminary, one-third of my class was female," Rev. Bandy said. "It was the first year that women in any great numbers started to enter seminary."

Once ordained, new ministers are generally placed in rural parishes.

"In the United Church when you're ordained, the church places you. You're settled by the church and the charges have no choice," she explained. "Therefore it was very easy for me to be placed."

However, the situation changes when a minister wants to go to another church. "It's hard for women to be 'called' and find themselves a second placement," Rev. Bandy said. "If nobody calls you, you stay where you are."

A recent issue of The

United Church Observer bemoaned this fact, noting that there is a much higher percentage of women pastors in the prairie provinces and the Maritimes where they are well received.

SECOND CALL
"The problems seem to occur at the time of the second call. Women just are not being asked to apply to congregations, especially in urban Ontario," Mary Sanderson of the Division of Ministry Personnel and Education said in the article.

The United Church headquarters circulates a list of ministers seeking another position and churches looking for new or additional ministers as a service to assist both groups.

"I heard one woman minister say that when she puts her applications out for another parish she always just puts her initials down," Rev. Bandy said. "That way she hides the fact that she's female."

"It's kind of sad in a way that you wouldn't be judged on your own merits but would immediately be excluded just because you're female," she said.

It was in 1936 that the United Church ordained its first woman, and although 46 years have passed since then, it's still unusual to see women ministers around.

"People are so unaccustomed to seeing women in a clergy collar. When I go to the hospital for visits they turn around and look at me and I know it's not my devastating beauty," Rev. Bandy said. "I like to go 'Yes, I am a minister!'"

People are still unaccustomed to seeing women in the pulpit, Rev. Bandy said.

HARD TIME
In the conservative northern part of New York state where she co-ministered with her husband, Rev. Bandy had a hard time establishing herself as minister.

Unfamiliar with women ministers, parishioners would call her up and say "I know how busy a minister's wife is dear, but can you..."

Although she was very visible as a minister, Rev. Bandy said that because she was working with a man, people tended to downplay her authority.

Calling herself a "low-key, laid-back feminist", Rev. Bandy believes in equal respect for equal work. She recalled one summer funeral she conducted while still a student minister. Having been the only remotely religious person available at the time, the Saskatchewan farming family had to settle for her services though they were shocked to have a female pastor bury one of their own. Rev.



There's a down home quality about Lynne Bandy that makes strangers feel comfortable. Born in a small village in the Blue Mountain area, Rev. Bandy hasn't strayed far from her roots. Since March she has been working part time at Lansing United Church in Willowdale and besides finding it a challenge, finds it satisfying to be using her interpersonal skills again.

(Herald photo)

Bandy said that after the service, by the graveside, the family went so far as to refuse to shake hands with her or accept any physical gesture of support.

JOB EASIER
Does being female come in useful? Rev. Bandy thinks it helps and makes her job easier.

"I think sometimes women find it easier to talk to another woman," she said. "And sometimes it's easier for men to be emotional with a woman than to express their emotions to a man."

As well, being female grants her automatic venue into maternity wards in hospitals, or when it comes to ministering to women who have had a mastectomy or hysterectomy. Such women are often reluctant to share their feelings with a man, though he "be of the cloak."

Being female herself makes it easier for her to listen to and understand female complaints, and

less prone to dismiss them or treat them as insignificant, Rev. Bandy said.

As for women being too emotional, what's wrong with that, counters Rev. Bandy. She can usually maintain self-control and stay distant while conducting a funeral, she said, confessing she cried through a funeral she was conducting for a friend once.

RIGHT WORDS
"It's probably the most unprofessional thing I've done in my life," she said. "I was embarrassed. But it's easier for a woman to be emotional. People

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