



## **Making Room for Women Project**

**Interview with Barbara Langton  
March 9<sup>th</sup>, 2022**



**THE ARCHIVES**

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Interviewee: Barbara Langton  
Date of Interview: March 9<sup>th</sup>, 2022

Interviewed by: Catherine Atyeo  
Location: Zoom call

*Condensed and abridged by Rev. Barbara Langton*

**Tell me a bit about your early life—your family, community, participation in church.**

I grew up in Victoria, BC, right at the beginning of the Boomers (1947). Dad was in the Navy, Mom a stay-at-home mother of 5 children. Dad was often away, so Mom did much of the caregiving. I was the middle of the pack.

Mom and Dad were always very supportive of our decisions about hobbies, school courses, career choices - about what we wanted to do with our lives. I am very grateful for their support.

Church was an important part of our lives from the start. I was baptized aboard HMCS Ontario because my parents had moved from Ontario and were not yet official members of any congregation. The church they were attending with friends would not baptize me because my parents did not yet “belong”. The navy Chaplain had no such a problem!

My parents later joined Belmont Ave United Church in Victoria and remained there until it closed on June 25th, 2000.

Growing up, I attended all the activities at our little church – Mission Band, Explorers, CGIT, Hi-C, And Kairos, the senior Youth Group of the day.

When Dad was home, I loved to go to church with him on Sunday evening. We went to UCC, Anglican, Salvation Army, Pentecostal, Open Door Spiritualist Church or any others we wanted to visit.

**Can you remember an early defining moment that made you aware of gender inequality?**

In Elementary school, I wanted to belong to school patrol (flags for crossing busy roads). I discovered that only boys were given these responsibilities.

In Junior High, girls had to wear skirts or dresses to school. If the weather was very cold, we could wear pants but had to change as soon as we got to school. I also discovered in Junior High that other activities were restricted to boys. My friend and I decided we would like to join the Chess club and discovered that only boys could be in the club. We discussed it with the teacher, who agreed that we had a valid point and allowed us to attend a meeting. We went to a few meetings of the club and decided Chess was not something we wanted to do. At least we were able to decide this for ourselves.

In Senior High, I signed up for a Physics class. There were 2 girls in the class and we both noticed that the teacher was not helpful to us. On the first day of the class, he asked me to go into the cloakroom and bring out a "stroboscope". I had no idea what he meant. As it turned out I didn't like Physics because it had little meaning for my life.

While in University I first became aware that salaries for summer jobs seemed to be different for males and females. I worked in the post office, in care facilities and wherever else I could find employment. A friend of mine worked as highway flag boy one summer. That year I netted \$500 for summer while he netted \$5000. I know that this might be comparing apples to oranges, but women were not allowed to be flag persons.

When I entered Union Theological College in 1969, my faculty advisor said something like this: "You know, it isn't fair but women seem to have to work twice as hard as men to end up at the same finish line."

The process in moving towards ordination was not very different for me. During the Ordination interview I had with members of BC Conference I was asked why I was not married? When I replied that no one had yet asked me, another asked if it was because I was too fat.

There were only three members in our class who graduated in 1972. We were invited to choose three places where we might like to go. The two men in my class were given their first choices. I chose Alberta, Manitoba, Quebec. I was offered Blackville, New Brunswick and agreed to go. The day before the report that would approve my appointment was to go to Maritime Conference, a group of women from the pastoral charge said NO. They did not want a woman. That was the end of the conversation. I never talked to or met any members of the congregations to which I was going to share in ministry. Instead, I was sent to Port Mouton, Nova Scotia, a five point pastoral charge half way between Halifax and Yarmouth, on the eastern shore of Nova Scotia.

I stayed there for two years, and my experience was by no means all bad. But in the end, I but felt a bit adrift and abandoned by the wider Church in a way my classmates did not.

**What about your education? What contributed to your vocational choices. Who were your role models?**

Mom encouraged all of us to go as far as we could. She was born in 1918, graduating from Grade 13 in Ontario at the age of 16, in the midst of the Depression. She wanted to go into Pharmacy but at the time, girls were not admitted because students wishing to enter Pharmacy had to work in a pharmacy before entering the program and they wanted boys who could do heavy lifting and the grunt work of being in a local pharmacy.

Laura Butler, then Assistant Minister of Metropolitan United Church, in Victoria, was a woman who inspired me greatly. She did mostly Christian Education work and was very good at it, too. To my knowledge, she was never invited to become senior minister. She may not have

wanted to be so named anyway.

Murray Henderson and Margaret Henderson, from Belmont Avenue United we're both very supportive when I expressed interest in ministry. I will always be grateful to them for encouraging me to consider ministry as a possible calling.

Mrs. Andrews was my Vic High School German teacher and counsellor. She encouraged me to enter the Bachelor of Arts program when I asked her about teaching. She suggested that if I wanted to teach, I would be better served to complete a BA degree and then take one year of education as was then required to teach in BC. I changed course and went into ministry.

### **What led to your decisions about volunteer involvements?**

My way of working was to see a piece of work that needed to be done and then ask some questions.

Did my skill sets fit it? Could I be helpful?

I also began to notice that many times someone would steer me in a particular direction and then encouraged me to explore it. For example, Murray Henderson talked to our youth Group (Kairos) while I was still in university. He mentioned that the United Church, even in the late 1960s was short of people to go on "summer mission fields."

These were short term summer appointments in smaller United Churches across the country that did not have full time ministry. Each United Church theological student was required to complete two summer mission fields before being commissioned or ordained. There were simply not enough theological students to fill the churches asking for summer ministry. So, I applied. I was accepted and loved the experience of being engaged in full time ministry, if only for four months in the summer.

One of my assignments was in New Westminster. Part of my work that summer was to spend time talking about the value of church involvement to people in apartments nearby. Two of the ministry personnel with whom I worked that summer were Art Anderson, United Church, and an Anglican priest. I spent one memorable morning with the Anglican priest. He made it abundantly clear that he would cooperate with me in any way he could but that as soon as I was ordained, any conversations would end because, he believed, women should not have the right to be ordained.

### **Leadership responsibilities?**

After spending some time in Scotland, I returned to Ministry, where I remained until retiring. Most of that time was spent in Kootenay Presbytery. Because it was a small Presbytery in terms of people and pastoral charges, we all had to help where we were able.

I was Presbytery secretary for a time, on Ministry, Personnel and Education committees, and

even did records reviews for a few years—going over church books, minutes, marriage registries, and the like. It fascinated us to see how others were doing ministry in their little corners of the church world.

At a Conference level, I was a member of the Children and Youth Ministry member and was chair of the Ministry and Personnel committee for several years. It was such a privilege to be part of the larger work of the United Church.

In small town ministries, as in any pastoral positions, there are often opportunities to share in the wider Church life through ecumenical activities. Most communities in which I served had pastors' groups in almost every community, including Grand Forks Shared Ministry, Kimberley United Church, Cranbrook United Church and even in Hobart Tasmania, where I had a wonderful opportunity to be part of a Pulpit Exchange. The Uniting Church in Australia formed in 1975 in a situation much like our denomination. Three denominations amalgamated and shared many of the joys and a few of the difficulties in "blended families." Most of the time, we figure out ways to share together in faith in ways that enrich us all. Thanks be to the God that, many times, we find the ability to hear a variety of voices as we listen for God's voice in our midst.

### **What were important issues, joys, challenges in your life?**

Prejudice of some people about women in church was an obvious one. Perhaps my greatest joys were around being part of the life and faith of such a wonderful, although at times, contentious lives of those who are searching for ways to be faithful to God's call to them not just as we live together in church but as we work together in the wider community to which we belong. Much of pastoral work gave me life and I thank all those nameless people with whom I shared ministry.

In addition, I was privileged to travel lots across the province, across the country and, occasionally, around the world.

One of my regrets was that throughout my ministry, because I was single, I often did too much work because I didn't have family beckoning me to find a genuine way or being in ministry without burning out. I know that this is a common problem for many others as well. On hindsight, I had not always followed my belief in the importance of lay people!

I remember, hearing on many occasions, that the unofficial church policy was that "ministers" were not to be friends with the people among whom we served. I understand that there are valid reasons for this, but my experience was that it is not always easy to do so and possibly not prudent to do so. And yet, at the same time, it is required at times to preach the gospel in faithful ways and often some people in doing so.

In the latter years of full-time ministry, I developed Shingles. That was, for me, a turning point in ministry, since I could not properly do the required work necessary for the congregation in

which I was serving. I owe a deep debt of gratitude to our church for encouraging me to take the time I needed and to step away when it was necessary.

**Is there a project or work you are especially proud of?**

I think what I discovered, over the years, the importance of small communities of faith and the profound importance of lay people.

I remember Mrs. Robinson, in Glasgow, Scotland. I will admit that Glasgow was and still is not small. But churches everywhere I have been still exist because there is a community of faith in which to do work. Several struggling congregations had studied and considered amalgamation for years. At one meeting I attended, after a considerable time debating the issue once more, said that she thought the time had come to stop talking and take action. The congregation, after hearing her small, calm voice, voted to amalgamate. The still, small voice of a tiny woman.

I also spent a few years in Kootenay Presbytery as Mutual Ministries Coordinator. Congregations were having trouble attracting people to apply for ministry positions and finding the funds to afford full time or even part time ministry. We picked a name and then obtained funding to work with small groups of people in small congregations. We learned from those people that each congregation knows what it wants and needs if we offer them opportunities to express it.

Wesley Frensdorff, bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Nevada from 1972 until 1985, had some wise words to share with us. He said that every community of faith has within itself the resources it needs to do ministry—every community has within itself...

As we have worked our way through the Covid 19 pandemic and all the changes that had brought to our church life, I think we are learning anew what that means for us all. We are all in this wonderfully and fearfully made creation of God together and I thank God for the opportunities that came my way to be just a small part of that creation.