



Making Room for Women Project

Interview with Susan Burns

August 15th, 2020



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Oral History Recording Summary

Interviewee: Susan Burns

Interviewed by: Katherine Gear Chambers

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Time Log (minutes)	Description of Content
00:01	Beginning of interview; introduction, permission
00:48	Early involvement in the church, family and church
03:41	Education, UBC, gendered discrimination at university, MBA in Public Policy Analysis, VST, mentors
09:24	Gender discrimination in the workplace, working at Chartered Accountants of British Columbia, VST as a space of community and female dominated
13:15	Working at the Credit Union, working in academia, teaching at UBC, teaching at SFU and bringing their MBA program downtown
14:59	Working in the church, teaching Sunday school, being chair of Christian Education, church providing values for work life
23:43	Disruption in the church, Dunbar deepening, working at the conference level, clergy misconduct situation and its ramifications
40: 58	Dunbar-Ryerson merger, what we've learned because of COVID, personal mission within the church
49:34	Camp Fircom, working on provincial and national levels within the church, Senior's Working Group, influence of class, race, sexual orientation on life and church involvement
1:00:00	Final comments, good-byes

Susan Burns

1:03:25

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Dunbar Heights, Pacific Spirit, church, people, called, congregation, laughter, terms, amalgamation, Ryerson, lay, questions, group, work, situation, education, support, Vancouver, women, bit, absolutely

SPEAKERS

Katherine Gear Chambers, Susan Burns

Katherine Gear Chambers 00:01

Today is Sunday, August 15th. And I'm joined here [by] Susan Burns. Susan, do I have your permission to proceed with this interview?

Susan Burns 00:09

You do.

Katherine Gear Chambers 00:10

Thank you. Can you tell me a little bit about your early life, your family, community, and participation in the church?

Susan Burns 00:18

Okay, well, I've gone through the questions and maybe I should ask, what is your desired length for this?

Katherine Gear Chambers 00:25

Oh, we usually start interviews within about an hour. And if there's a lot more to be said, we can always have a second interview, or we can also go over. I've done, I think, maybe two and a half hours all at once. So you know, as much as you can say.

Susan Burns 00:42

[indistinguishable] a lifetime, but... [laughter]

Katherine Gear Chambers 00:46

Yes, but we're keen to hear everything.

Susan Burns 00:48

So to talk about my early life and family: I'm from a family of four; two children, mother and father. Early life in terms of the church was that my mother took us to Dunbar Heights United Church. I was in Brownies there and in Sunday School. And then later, we moved and I went to CGIT [Canadian Girls in

Training] at Ryerson United. And when I was spending time at Ryerson, it was just me at that point; the family wasn't really part of the church. My mother took us, but the family didn't participate. So then I was on my own from about age 12. And continued attending Ryerson, went to their young people's and, the other things that I was involved in. I'm not quite sure how it happened but I decided to get confirmed in the Anglican Church. So I did that. And Young Life was a very active part of the community at that time, and active in schools. And so I was part of Young Life as well. And then sort of late in high school time, went to Naramata's first huge Conclave. So, lots of involvement.

Katherine Gear Chambers 01:12

Yeah, yeah. That's great. So, you came to the United Church through your family? And it was, from what I understand, your own choice to stay with the church? Do you remember what it was about the church that compelled you to become such an active member?

Susan Burns 02:48

I think it was because I learned things. And it was more fun than school.

Katherine Gear Chambers 02:58

Absolutely. [laughter]

Susan Burns 03:00

And I learned things about the world. So there was, you know, active engagement with the various missions that were worldwide. And I remember being quite fascinated by that, as a young child, and not having heard about those kinds of things at home. And then as I got older, it was the autonomy. We kind of ran our own youth group. We did some fairly innovative things.

Katherine Gear Chambers 03:32

Wonderful!

Susan Burns 03:33

I think the adults would just as soon let us carry on. So that was fun.

Katherine Gear Chambers 03:41

Great. Yes. Wonderful. I'll move on to education. So, from I suppose high school, what was your educational path and what contributed to your vocational choices from that?

Susan Burns 04:02

Okay, so from high school I went to UBC and I took a degree in Home Economics, which was a science degree at that time. In terms of contributing to my choice, I can remember more or less being told that, you know, my choices were teaching, nursing, home economics, that I couldn't be... I went to a vocational fair at the school, and they had something called Applied Science. That really fascinated me. So I went. Of course, I was the only female, and I was hastily informed that I really didn't want to be in this place. But I said, "It said Applied Sciences." "Oh well," they said, "this is for engineers. You don't want to be an engineer." I'd never heard of Applied Sciences. So, that [restriction] was definitely there. So I got my degree in home economics. And then later on I went back to school and got, more or less,

the equivalent of an MBA in Public Policy Analysis. And further, from that, I attended VST [Vancouver School of Theology] and got a master's degree there in Spirituality. So, I have lots of education.

Katherine Gear Chambers 05:37

Yes. Can you remember what called you to study at VST and to pursue theology?

Susan Burns 05:45

I think what called me was the difference between working within the church, and on policy matters and important organizational issues, and working in the employment field. The employment field didn't have the same kind of richness and the same kind of complexity, and definitely didn't have space for an overt recognition of values and meaning and personal growth and fulfillment. So I think that's... I mean, who knows what called me back? I know, it probably looked like frustration. And it looked like I was hungry for something different than I was getting in the workforce.

Katherine Gear Chambers 06:55

Yeah, I can imagine. Can you remember who your role models and mentors were during that period of time?

Susan Burns 07:00

I'm not sure which period you're speaking about, because I've been fortunate to have a number of people be very supportive.

Katherine Gear Chambers 07:09

Right. Well, all of them, then, that you can... [laughter]

Susan Burns 07:16

I don't think I really started having mentors until I went back to school. And I went back – I thought I was middle aged, but I really was only in my early 30s. Little did I know. But it was people that I had volunteered with and met with who took the time to say to me, "You could be doing something else. And you could be getting paid for this." And then one person even told me how much they would pay me. And I sort of thought, "Oh, wow! Okay." And so it was the taking that time, and really letting me know that what I did was making a difference, or that they saw there was potential. Then when I got into school, being at the ripe age of 30, I actually was closer in age to the profs than I was to the students. So I – because this is sort of before all the adult learners who, you know... So a lot of the prompts were very, very helpful. And I walk in there, and they'd give me books, they'd say, "Well, you should explore this. Well, if you're interested in this, go and talk to them, they'll let you into their class." And da-da-da-da. And certainly my family was very supportive. I didn't have to fight to go to school. I won't even tell you what the tuition fees were because they were so ridiculously low that there was not a problem paying for that. Yeah. So those were the school influences.

Katherine Gear Chambers 09:24

Can you remember an early defining moment, as well as – what you're speaking [about] in terms of the Applied Science, sort of exclusion – that made you aware of gender inequality?

Susan Burns 09:37

Certainly one, and I am embarrassed to say this came so late, but I discovered that – this was probably even after I left the institution that my first job I'd been hired and was paid half of what they were paying the male...

Katherine Gear Chambers 10:03

Equivalent.

Susan Burns 10:03

...male person who was at the same standard, and yet I was hired, specifically as a female. Like, they decided that they needed more women at that level. And, you know, once I found that out... It was a very egalitarian organization, very forward looking in many, many ways. And it was a wonderful place to work. But, I mean, that is very telling. And I still feel a bit of a sting.

Katherine Gear Chambers 10:48

Yes. Do you remember, was that in the church? Or...

Susan Burns 10:52

No, it wasn't in the church. And I'm not going to name the organization because I don't think that's necessarily helpful.

Katherine Gear Chambers 11:01

I think it happened everywhere.

Susan Burns 11:03

Yeah, it happened everywhere. Exactly. I guess the other thing is that – and this was discovered again, later – but I did a lot of work with the – well, at first they were called Chartered Accountants of British Columbia. And I discovered there – here was an organization that really listened to women, took them seriously, worked collaboratively. And it was an entirely different experience, and understood my frustrations in my other employment, where you simply weren't listened to. Didn't mean they had to adopt everything, but you really weren't listened to; things were totally discounted. And often, the only woman around the table.

Katherine Gear Chambers 12:08

Yeah. Were there any moments during your education at VST where you felt that women's voices were being heard differently than men's? Or was that one of those spaces where there was an equal amount of attention paid to women?

Susan Burns 12:24

Well, I was in the spirituality program, and it was mainly women. And there were a lot of female profs. So I wouldn't say that that was really ever – for me anyway – an issue coming up. Yeah, it just wasn't there.

Katherine Gear Chambers 12:50

That's good. So there was a space of community there.

Susan Burns 12:53

Absolutely. A space of community and the space of mutual collaboration and that kind of thing.

Katherine Gear Chambers 13:00

Wonderful. So, in returning back to work, you've mentioned in your biographical form that you've had a number of jobs, paid positions outside of the home. Could you list some of those roles that you've had, some of the work that you've done?

Susan Burns 13:15

Okay, I first started out working with Credit Union and did a lot in the area of marketing and strategic planning. And then from there, I moved actually into the academia, taught at UBC and at Simon Fraser University, again, in the area of marketing and strategy, business policy. And when I was at SFU, it was communications. And particularly loved... I had an evening class and I had mature students, and we had a great time. From there, I actually did a year of consulting and then was hired by SFU to bring their executive MBA program down into the city. They wanted to expand it, and they wanted it to be more centrally located and connected to the downtown core, and the community downtown. So I did that for many, many years. And we did all those things. [Those were] more or less the things that I did. I did a lot of professional volunteering with the Chartered Accountants. But that was not paid work.

Katherine Gear Chambers 14:54

Right. So during this period of time, were you also involved with the church, or was this prior to...?

Susan Burns 14:59

Oh, absolutely. I was, I was. I don't think I've accepted at this stage of my life where I'm now pulling back from leadership, and being what I hope is more of a resource and a support for those who are taking it on. That's the hope, of course. And it actually is working. But now you have to remind me of the question again,

Katherine Gear Chambers 15:30

Oh, sorry, the working outside of the home for pay. Oh, and my follow-up question was your involvement with the church during your career.

Susan Burns 15:38

Yeah, absolutely. Church has always been a prime community and a prime source of friends, like-minded thinkers. I've always enjoyed the process of moving things forward collaboratively, and you certainly have lots of call to do that in the church, and in a complex environment, where you're never repeating the same thing again, as you do in business, as seasons roll around. So yeah, I've always been very involved.

Katherine Gear Chambers 16:26

Wonderful. So your involvement with the church was then volunteer. What led to your decisions to be involved? Or were some of those positions also paid positions?

Susan Burns 16:39

No, they weren't paid positions. I think somebody issued a challenge. I seem to have started out in many ways; you know, someone says, "Would you like to?" And I think that first one was teach Sunday school. "Oh, sure. I've never taught Sunday school before, but fine, I'll teach Sunday school." So I did that... in the early days. And this would be in Whitehorse, for eight years or so. And then got to Vancouver, and wasn't there very long – and this was the old fashioned way, was some male knocked on your door and asked to have a conversation. The conversation was, "Would you be the Chair of Christian Education?" And I didn't answer, "Oh, sure," right away. My first question was, "Well, what's Christian Education?" And he gave me some sort of answers. So I said, "Well, I'll think about it." And this is where mentors come in, too. I figured if I was going to chair it – I'd never been to a CE [Christian Education] meeting, right? So you do need to know a bit. So I asked around and I was told to phone Susan Lindenberger.

Katherine Gear Chambers 18:17

Yes, we're interviewing her next. [laughter]

Susan Burns 18:20

Oh, is that right? So I phoned Susan Lindenberger, who was at that time working at Ryerson. And she said, "Ah, sure," in her southern drawl. "Come on over." And so she drew out for me, on a great big huge pieces of paper, on the floor, what Christian Education was all about. And Susan Lindenberger has a beautiful mind and a very wonderful heart. And all of that was pictured in this – what is CE. So I said, "Sure." And that's how I got into that. That was a real challenge, actually, that CE, and I had extraordinary support from the minister, and from the wider church, actually, who came in and did various workshops with us, to move us from quite a dysfunctional place to a very functional place.

Katherine Gear Chambers 19:36

Good. Was your position there more team management, or was it executing the education? What was your position?

Susan Burns 19:45

I would say it was more management, communications. Yeah. Trying to get the right people on board and working together in a way that was helpful.

Katherine Gear Chambers 20:01

Right. So was it something that your experience in your professional life was able to support your work there? In terms of what you'd done?

Susan Burns 20:11

Well, that's a very interesting question, Katherine. Very interesting question. Because during my first job, I invited my minister out for lunch. And he sort of said, like, "What's this all about?" And I had been working at that point, maybe three years or so. And my point was that I was thanking him for showing me through the church, how to function effectively in groups, that I would have never survived in the

work world if I hadn't learned the skills that I learned in church. And that bringing those into the workforce made all the difference. Rather than the other way around.

Katherine Gear Chambers 21:08

Interesting.

Susan Burns 21:10

Isn't that interesting? Yeah. So now people are very upfront about talking about soft skills, and the unspoken, non-linear aspects of making things work. But at that point, not so. It was all very, you know, have you got the math, have you actually done this, literally, before? Which, of course, doesn't really matter that much.

Katherine Gear Chambers 21:48

No, it doesn't. Right.

Susan Burns 21:50

So the church was instrumental, I would say, in how I could operate within the work world.

Katherine Gear Chambers 21:58

Right. Were there instances, in terms of situations where you could apply the skills you learned in the church? Were there instances in the workforce where you did face difficulty, because you were a woman in a (I assume) predominantly male profession? Did those experiences of collaboration in the church also assist in those situations? If they arose?

Susan Burns 22:23

Well, I would say they assisted in the sense [that] I was confident in those skills. And you know, some of it's my makeup, and some of it would be that experience within the church, but I knew who I was. And I actually wasn't going to let anybody change what I knew in terms of that deep inner sense of integrity. I could get very angry and upset and actually not even believe that people would act like that, or think like that. It took me again, a lot... I'm a very slow learner. But it took me so long to understand that not everybody had the same benevolent attitude that I had. I couldn't understand why they wouldn't. But they obviously don't.

Katherine Gear Chambers 23:31

Yeah. That's good. So what – in terms of your leadership roles in the church, there was CE and what other leadership roles? I know there have been many that you've carried out.

Susan Burns 23:43

Yes, there are. And I don't know if you've got a particular kind of experience that... maybe I'll give you a selection and you can say, what might be more interesting. So there was a time when our church went through a deep disruption. And it took 10 years to really get it back in place. And so I was part of a self-selected group of lay people who just decided that we would hold together and move this along. Subsequent to that, there was an initiative put out by the minister to do some, what we ended up calling "deepening," so it was called "Dunbar deepening." And the idea was to really look inward more, in

terms of personally but also as an institution and say, “Okay, where should we be going?” And that in turn led to the decision that as a congregation, we were willing to actually sell our building – we voted on this – and see if we could find another congregation to join, if that congregation was interested in a new collaborative enterprise on the west side of Vancouver. So that was another one. I was then involved in the group that steered that – the eventual amalgamation together. Sat on the council for a bit.

Katherine Gear Chambers 25:56

Was that the Dunbar-Ryerson?

Susan Burns 25:58

That was the Dunbar-Ryerson.

Katherine Gear Chambers 26:00

So quite recent?

Susan Burns 26:01

Yeah, exactly. So I don't know, I wrote down – trying to remember where it is, but those are the ones that I remember. Oh, I guess the other one was that I remembered, subsequently, that at the conference level, I was part of a group called the Staffing Model Review Team, or something like that. We were looking at the courts of the church. This was in the '80s. And some of us were becoming very frustrated with who was doing what, and how it wasn't working. And where the disconnects were. And so that was a very meaningful involvement. And that was a situation where a male lead literally thwarted the project.

Katherine Gear Chambers 27:16

Yikes.

Susan Burns 27:17

So that happened in the church. And so those things happened, even in the church, where information was withheld. When we went to present, there was kind of a dismissal. Fortunately, a very strong lay woman insisted on hearing the report. And it wasn't just me. But I believe I was chairing it. And it was a mixed group of male and female, lay, ordained, various, you know – the full United Church mix. But not race.

Katherine Gear Chambers 28:18

So what were the changes that you were proposing? And what do you think might have been his reasons for thwarting it? Like, were they a threat? To an establishment?

Susan Burns 28:29

You know, I don't think they were based on substance because he would not have known. I think they were based on, you know, the purely human fear of being exposed. And loss of power. And yeah, I don't know what else might have been in it, but I think it was more his personal thing, rather than any

threatening recommendation, although the interesting thing is that several of the recommendations are things that have finally, subsequently taken place. But, I mean, it took decades. Decades.

Katherine Gear Chambers 28:53

Yeah. What are some of those things that have now taken place that you were hoping for?

Susan Burns 29:26

I think one of the big ones, where the whole focus on spiritual life, and people actually taking responsibility for their own relationship with God [phone rings] ...Do you want to stop the [phone ringing]...

Katherine Gear Chambers 29:51

No, no, it's fine. But if you need to take a phone call, yeah, I can pause.

Susan Burns 29:57

[To caller] Can't take this call, I'll phone you back later.

Katherine Gear Chambers 30:02

Thank you. Appreciate that. So you're saying the spiritual life was one of the things that you...

Susan Burns 30:13

...Was one of the things that we recognized that the lay people wanted. They were hungry for this. And they were not getting it. And they were not getting what was widely available in the seminaries, was just not coming down to the pews.

Katherine Gear Chambers 30:33

Yeah. Yeah.

Susan Burns 30:34

The other thing was that there seemed to be, not the kind of support that [was] offered through presbyteries at that time. [phone ringing]

Katherine Gear Chambers 30:50

You can take the call, I can pause the recording.

Susan Burns 30:56

Okay. [phone ringing]

Katherine Gear Chambers 31:54

Everything okay?

Susan Burns 31:56

Yeah.

Katherine Gear Chambers 31:56

Good. Okay. So you're saying that what was being offered in seminaries wasn't available to the lay people. And so there was a push for there to be more spiritual, sort of direction and education.

Susan Burns 32:12

Exactly. And then I guess the other thing was that the congregations, we felt, could have been better supported by presbytery, or the next level, which would be the case, now the next level. That there was quite a disconnect. And again, both those things definitely have been worked on. But it's taken a long time.

Katherine Gear Chambers 32:45

A longer time. Yeah. So returning to some of the other roles that you just mentioned, I think the first one that you mentioned was a time of disruption in the church. And you sort of took on a role, as in a self-selected group to mediate that. Could you say more about that experience?

Susan Burns 33:05

Well, this was an experience involving clergy misconduct, that our congregation called, and [I] really have to credit the lay members of the church who, at great personal cost, emotional cost, stood firm in pursuing this situation that we felt was not right. And were proven that we did uncover a situation that was very unhealthy and had been repeated in many earlier churches. So you know, there is a strength of the lay there.

Katherine Gear Chambers 34:07

Absolutely.

Susan Burns 34:11

This of course, you know, it's like a family divorce. Someone called it like a very great family illness. Many of us were bereft, but determined. And over the course of the next 10 years, when we had maybe eight different clergy, we more or less said, "Okay, things are not great. But we're going to keep things going." So in Christian Education terms, we made sure that there were things for all ages going on. Many led these, I one of them, but there were many others. The wider church was wonderful. And particularly the women, interestingly enough. They came, some preached, some helped with the Christian Education. Some gave advice and just sort of helped with Council.

But this was a time where the group of us that had taken this on were not as coherent as we would have liked. Every once in a while one of us would say, "I've had enough. This is it. I'm going somewhere else." And we all had other places that we went on Sunday morning from time to time, to be fed. And so the wider church was very aware of this. But every time one of us kind of lost it, the rest would say, "Oh, but you remember," you know, and would pull us back. But it took a long, long time for things to happen well. And what was interesting is that, I think at that time I was on Ministry and Personnel, and we ended up being tested again and again, with what you almost might call rogue situations where you'd think you'd done all your hiring well, and then you get into month one, and you'd say, "Uh oh, there is something going on here." And we had to go through the whole process again. So

it was a time where the lay people, with good support from outside, and clergy, really, really had to work.

Katherine Gear Chambers 37:16

Yeah. Did that group of lay people that you mentioned, that you were a part of, did you have the support of the presbytery during this time?

Susan Burns 37:29

Presbytery wasn't a strong presence then.

Katherine Gear Chambers 37:33

Yeah. You mentioned that you were ensuring that there were programs happening at all periods of time for all ages. How did your work during this period of time touch on the relationship between the church and faith when there was turmoil happening in the church, did you feel there was a loss of faith?

Susan Burns 37:33

Not in that oversight, where you might expect that somebody would maybe be following this. If you know United Church, you know that the west side of Vancouver is fairly well resourced and well educated. So there were strong resource groups to tap into, and friendships to call on, both lay and clergy. But it was a pretty messy situation, and in many ways difficult for anybody who wasn't going to be present right there, to continue for 10 years, fostering.

Susan Burns 38:48

Did we, did we attack it sort of head on? Like one might today?

Katherine Gear Chambers 38:53

Or, what were you thinking about?

Susan Burns 38:54

One of the things we did was somebody volunteered to train for the Disciple Bible. And we offered two or three iterations of that. And that was enormously helpful in bonding people together, in terms of their own faith development. We did quite a few – like, we studied a lot of [Marcus] Borg and various other forward-thinking Christian writers that were writing at the time, for adult study. I don't think that we were self-reflective in our own situation.

Katherine Gear Chambers 39:01

Okay.

Susan Burns 39:28

Later, we could see what was happening.

Katherine Gear Chambers 39:53

So did you find that there was a loss of faith during that period of time, or was it more sort of a strife within the community, but not necessarily relating to people's relationship with their own religion?

Susan Burns 40:07

I don't think that there was a loss of faith.

Katherine Gear Chambers 40:10

Okay. Good.

Susan Burns 40:11

I think in some ways it was the opposite. People dug in.

Katherine Gear Chambers 40:18

Interesting. Okay.

Susan Burns 40:19

Not to say that there weren't some people who had to do some of the very tough personnel work involved to this various process. Who just burnt out. And some burned.

Katherine Gear Chambers 40:40

Yeah. It's a lot of work.

Susan Burns 40:44

It's a lot of work. And it's harrowing, and it touches you at your deepest level.

Katherine Gear Chambers 40:51

Yeah. Was there anything more you wanted to say about that before we move on?

Susan Burns 40:57

I don't think so.

Katherine Gear Chambers 40:58

Okay. [laughter] In terms of the Dunbar-Ryerson merge, which is the third project you mentioned, how did that – well, first, is there anything more in particular that you wanted to say to expand on that experience?

Susan Burns 41:12

The Dunbar-Ryerson merge?

Katherine Gear Chambers 41:14

Yes.

Susan Burns 41:17

I think it is that maybe there's a continuity between what I was talking about previously, about this determined lay cabal, if you will, that knew how to work together. Very different – different needs, different ways of working. But strong faith. And not wanting to give up growth, not wanting to give up

creativity, not wanting to give up the meaningful engagement within the church, but also outside, you know, outreach projects, etc. And so that fed into this process that, that said, “Okay, these are all really important, and we’re not going to be able to sustain this on our own.” And that took a lot of discussion and a lot of deepening, again, more of that deepening, more study, more time together. So it has been a bit of a trajectory, because I’m not sure that there are many churches who have actually voted to close themselves down, willingly.

Katherine Gear Chambers 42:49

I don't think so.

Susan Burns 42:51

There were tears on some of the ballots. But people could see that that was the way to life.

Katherine Gear Chambers 43:00

Yeah. What did you learn from that experience that relates to the church now, both considering the decline of church attendance over the past decade, and also, specifically with COVID-19, and the inability for churches to meet in the conventional fashion? Did that merger and the closing church down experience teach you anything about how we might respond to these situations?

Susan Burns 43:30

Ah, okay. Well, certainly the merger, as in most really important undertakings, preparing, you prepare, you prepare, you make a decision, and you go and when you get there, and really, you're just beginning. So we had reached a certain point in our amalgamation, before the COVID arrived – and I'm not sure that I'm going to be able to follow your question in this, certainly, what's happened subsequently, is that there's been determination on the part of the new congregation, Pacific Spirit, to really focus on connecting people. So what, interestingly, that's led to is lots of lessons on how to do Zoom. Right? We're all learning how to do Zoom. And how to use the telephone again. And how to just phone somebody up and say, “How are you doing?” And so I'm not sure how moving into COVID, and what we've done in these last few months, how that connects to some of the other initiatives. In some ways the connection is more the other way in that, as an amalgamated congregation, we had great plans for selling one building, doing a major development, including low-cost housing, and that kind of thing, and a new centre, etc, etc. That [indistinguishable words] all just absolutely gone. And that was before COVID. And there [were] a lot of people feeling a bit down, because the Ryerson congregation had been working on this idea for 10 years.

Katherine Gear Chambers 46:05

Oh, gosh, I remember. Yeah.

Susan Burns 46:06

And so then COVID hit after that. And everything seemed as another sort of downer? Right? Nothing. So, we've been thrust right into the wilderness. Not knowing. Now the plans are all changed. And I think we're still in the process of “Where's this going now?” And I'm sensing seeds right now, that probably could be talked about early next year. But things are going to happen. But it's almost been the opposite.

There's been all of this buildup, and this lovely amalgamation and this "futuring." To have the future looks so different and completely unknown.

Katherine Gear Chambers 47:09

Yeah. Yeah. Okay. Thank you. Going back to my set questions. I keep going on a tangent. What were the important issues, joys, and challenges in your life? And is there a project or work that you're especially proud of?

Susan Burns 47:30

What were the issues, joys, and challenges of my life? I kind of think maybe, I've said a lot about that. It's the taking on challenges. It's the working with others. It's the collaboration in complex space.

Katherine Gear Chambers 47:52

And the, the work that you've been especially proud of, would those be those three projects that you've been speaking about?

Susan Burns 48:03

It would, and there's one other item, which – and it's interesting that I sort of had forgotten until now. But for the last 20 years, it has been my personal mission goal – whatever you want to say – to have within the church where I'm worshiping, a strong centering prayer group, and a healing ministry. And maybe I'd forgotten it because it's very much below the radar. Now with the amalgamation, that's becoming a little bit more mainstream, more recognized. But my sense is that those of us who are all lay people, who have kept these two ministries going throughout this whole time frame, and that's ongoing now, have provided a strong foundation for the church. And we'll continue to hold that important faith in action component.

Katherine Gear Chambers 49:34

Yeah, that's very good. I think there also have been, just to make sure we cover at least a lot of your work that you've contributed, there were other things that you listed on the biography from that I don't think we've touched on yet. One of them was Camp Fircom Society, you were a part of...

Susan Burns 49:55

Oh, yeah. Yeah, exactly. [laughter] Exactly. And really this is a family story and not just my story. Because not only have I been involved, but my husband's been involved, and in particular our children have been very involved, spending all of their teenage summers up at Camp Fircom, mostly leading. And then my son has designed a lot of the new buildings, and my daughter-in-law now is on the board. And I think the role that I helped play, along with many, many others, was to convince BC Conference that camping matters. And that needs to be supported, and it is a ministry, and that it has all the ingredients and more of a congregation, and needs to be supported. So yeah, that was a *huge* passion as well. But as I say, a family thing, and I could see what it did for my children, and how it shaped them as human beings and its compassionate people in the world.

Katherine Gear Chambers 51:22

Yeah. Absolutely. We have a lot of family stories as well that take place at Camp Fircom.

Susan Burns 51:30

Yes, well, you and I have a lot of family ties. We've just met but...

Katherine Gear Chambers 51:37

I think three generations of Gears?

Susan Burns 51:39

Yes, yeah. Your grandparents, and your parents, and aunts.

Katherine Gear Chambers 51:44

Yeah, it's really wonderful. Small world the United Church. So you've also done work with BC Conference in terms of, I think the Staffing Model Review Team. I think you were President of the Conference at some point?

Susan Burns 51:59

No, I wasn't President.

Katherine Gear Chambers 52:01

Okay. Oh, Finance Advisory Council.

Susan Burns 52:05

I was on the Finance Advisory Council. Yeah.

Katherine Gear Chambers 52:07

The Grants Committee, and Camping Committee. So that was a lot of work on the provincial level. And I think – do I see here federal as well, in terms of...

Susan Burns 52:18

Well. I was actually also on the Finance Committee nationally, as well for a time.

Katherine Gear Chambers 52:22

Right, as well as the Executive – yeah – the Executive Community Division Finance in the United Church of Canada. So can you – was there anything you wanted to say about that work, both the national and provincial?

Susan Burns 52:34

Well, if you're looking for how men put down women, I can tell you of one instance at the national level. I was on the Finance Committee seeking information to make a decision about something or other, and was not getting full information, was only getting expenses and not revenue, or – there was something not being answered. And the men who were involved in this particular issue, looked at me and said, "Now, dear, you wouldn't need to know that, if you were getting a mortgage," which – I think the whole room sort of took a deep breath in. And there was silence. I mean, it was so egregious, and so out of line, and so old school, and so ludicrous, that we couldn't even believe it.

Katherine Gear Chambers 53:53

Oh, gosh. Yeah.

Susan Burns 53:56

I mean, there was no finessing it at all. So that's, you know, that's the old, that was the old way.

Katherine Gear Chambers 54:05

Yeah. Yeah. And did you find it difficult to be working at the national level, especially as a lay person? Was there tension there? Or were you in the company of many other lay people?

Susan Burns 54:16

There were a number of lay people. What I found difficult was (and this, you know, very much permeated the rest of the church) was that there was a fear of numbers, and a fear of business. And certainly, you wouldn't be answering your questions about either one of those from a female. Notwithstanding, the fact that they didn't have a grasp on their own finances, because they weren't reporting out all the things they needed to know. They didn't understand it. So that was my frustration. And it has more to do with culture than it does to do with gender.

Katherine Gear Chambers 55:08

Yeah. Yeah. The culture of the church, specifically.

Susan Burns 55:12

The culture of the church, everything nicey nicey. And certainly business language was – people who are afraid of it.

Katherine Gear Chambers 55:22

Yeah. Maybe still are, to a certain extent. Yeah. Yes. [laughter] There's always a lot of work to be done. [laughter]

Susan Burns 55:34

Well, as we run out of more and more money, and more and more members, people are having to ask questions they weren't willing to ask.

Katherine Gear Chambers 55:43

Yeah, absolutely. The necessity. You are also currently involved with the Seniors' Working Group?

Susan Burns 55:52

Yes, and that's been a current thing. It came out of our initial discussions about the possibility of the need for amalgamation. So it really has turned into a bit of a support group for those of us who are in pastoral care and working in churches in this area. Prior to that we did a lot of education, both for the community and for the churches, about aging and services for those who are aging.

Katherine Gear Chambers 56:28

Yeah, that's very important. Yeah. Very good. Is there anything – any other involvements that we've missed? Or roles in the church?

Susan Burns 56:38

It's been a lot. It's been a gift to me because you don't always remember all of these things. So it's surfaced some things for me as well. Been such a delight to have your receptive listening and skilled questions.

Katherine Gear Chambers 56:57

Thank you. It's been lovely to learn so much about the church. I've got some final questions, if you've got the time.

Susan Burns 57:06

Okay.

Katherine Gear Chambers 57:06

Good. So I think we've touched on this already, but just in case, there's something we've missed, what have you been most passionate about in your adult years?

Susan Burns 57:17

Yeah, I think I probably have said that. It's the things that gave me joy and working with others. Doing things that meant things to me and to other people.

Katherine Gear Chambers 57:33

And then – this one sort of does relate again to gender, but also speaking a little bit more broadly. In what ways have you found that your class, and your race, as well as gender have impacted your life, your work in the church, or with your career? Or just interactions in general?

Susan Burns 57:54

Well, I guess these are questions now that I'm reflecting on. Certainly, weren't front and centre for the times I was speaking of. But you know, anybody who is white, and educated, and living in Vancouver – should be, I know I am, finding myself humbled when I recognize all of the unrecognized advantages that life has presented to me. So there's that. And there is also the recognition of not really having the opportunity, as much as I think I would want, to have interactions with people of other races and nationalities, even though in many contexts that I've worked in, there were people of colour and of different nationalities. And, you know, we were working together collaboratively, but it's nowhere near what is now being surfaced as the more equitable, more rich, more rewarding way to interact.

Katherine Gear Chambers 59:29

Yeah, absolutely. The church does have a lot of work to do in that area.

Susan Burns 59:35

And yet has still been one of the ones who has tried.

Katherine Gear Chambers 59:40

Yes, there's a passion -

Susan Burns 59:42

... to do a fair bit as well. More than others. But it's never enough. And the basis of understanding of where you stand, and what you should be doing, continues to shift.

Katherine Gear Chambers 59:58

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. Yeah, ongoing. So what direction do you hope the church will take in the future?

Susan Burns 1:00:11

One of deep faithfulness. I think that's it.

Katherine Gear Chambers 1:00:25

Yeah. Do you think that – sort of, again, we were talking about the Dunbar-Ryerson merger and COVID, and all the ways that the church is changing right now, what do you think that that will look like, sort of in a day to day, or in weekly meetings and gatherings? How will that deep faithfulness play out?

Susan Burns 1:00:44

I think it's going to test even the United Church's sense of inclusivity. And creativity. So, my hope is that it plays out in that we say, "We don't know; we've got to learn. And let's get busy doing that." And then we might figure out what we're really called to do.

Katherine Gear Chambers 1:01:32

Yes, absolutely. Well, those are all the questions that I have prepared to ask, but is there anything else you wanted to talk about? Or just add on?

Susan Burns 1:01:47

No, I just want to thank you so warmly, because you're just a lovely person.

Katherine Gear Chambers 1:02:02

Thank you. It has been such an honour to talk with you.

Susan Burns 1:02:05

And I can say that and you cannot contradict it. [laughter] And I want you to pass on my greetings to your mom and your dad.

Katherine Gear Chambers 1:02:16

I will. Thank you. They were excited to hear that we would be speaking today. It's been an honour to meet with you and talk with you about all of the work that you've done. So thank you for taking the time to share.

Susan Burns 1:02:32

Okay, and I'll go back to that telephone call. [laughter]

Katherine Gear Chambers 1:02:35

Yes, sorry. Yeah. Thank you very much, Susan.

Susan Burns 1:02:42

Bye-bye Katherine.

Katherine Gear Chambers 1:02:42

Bye. Take care.

[End of interview]