

Lay Chaplaincy ~ celebrating 35 years



Lay chaplain Pam Harte officiates at a wedding in Victoria.



Nicoline Guerrier marries Heidi Shapiro and Marleigh Greaney in Montreal this year.

Lay chaplains provide right to rites

I LOVE IT WHEN I SEE SOMEONE accidentally writing “rights of passage” instead of “rites of passage.” I believe people do indeed have a *right* to passage, to transition, to transform. And it’s a *right* for us as congregational members to have someone of our own congregation – our minister or a lay chaplain – assist us in planning and carrying out a ceremony to recognize the transition.

This coming year the cuc Lay Chaplaincy Program turns 35! Long before marriage commissioners, our ministers often found their time and energy pulled away from their congregation to perform weddings for individuals whether unchurched or “differently churched.” And in congregations without ministers, Unitarians often did not have access to a Unitarian ceremony, so had to make compromises when planning their ceremony.

That’s why we invented the Unitarian concept of “chaplain” in 1971; four years ago we modified the term to “lay chaplain” to avoid confusion with the professional ministry.

Today, there are nearly 90 lay chaplains across Canada (an average of two for every congregation). The program is foremost one of ensuring the “right to a rite” for anyone – Unitarian or not – who wants a religious ceremony, custom-designed for them to mark a significant passage in their individual or family life. (That’s why our lay chaplains and ministers have led the way for decades on same-sex marriage.)

Secondly, as ambassadors of our religion, lay chaplains are in a unique position to tell others about us.


The third purpose of the program is to provide spiritual development for the lay chaplains themselves. Our hope is that all of the roles that people take on in our congregations will provide spiritual development, of course, but in this case it really is front and centre.

If you’ve never had a conversation with your lay chaplains, ask them about how their experience has encouraged their spiritual growth. You will hear what a rich experience it is.

The cuc encourages congregations to celebrate their own lay chaplains’

rites of passage – from appointment to retirement. It’s particularly important to have smooth transitions and to honour those transitions given the new maximum term of six years.

Some congregations have a mentor program whereby a “lay chaplain in training” has a full year to work with the retiring lay chaplain before taking on the role. This provides the support needed for a new person to confidently begin their term and at the same time provides the retiring lay chaplain the opportunity to pass the flame.

Lastly, as part of the revisions made to the lay chaplaincy program in 2001, the cuc is offering enhanced training and enrichment opportunities, for experienced, new and prospective lay chaplains – three workshops this November, and three more in the spring. Any congregation member is welcome to attend. See details on the web site, below. 

– Mary Bennett, cuc Executive Director

www.cuc.ca/lay_chaplaincy/index.htm
or email to: lcc@cuc.ca

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Lay chaplain Katherine Roback officiated at this memorial service in Vancouver, where the ashes of the deceased were scattered from a fishing boat into the Fraser River near Ladner

Memorial services are a challenge and a reward

When lay chaplain Katherine Roback first met the family of an elderly woman who died last spring, she felt an inexplicable coldness from them towards their mother. She couldn't square this apparent lack of familial love with the woman's public face as an outgoing and well-loved physician.

"I wondered, what caused this? What could have created such a mask?" says Roback, one of four lay chaplains at the Unitarian Church of Vancouver. As usual, she had a brief time to get to know the family, and prepare a memorial service with them. "I took it as a challenge," says Roback, and set to work.

The night before the service she learned a secret from one of the sons of the deceased – that she was a holocaust survivor, and had hidden this fact (and her Jewish identity) from her children until they were nearly adults. In the memorial service, Roback alluded to this history by discussing the impact of

surviving a war when others don't. After the eulogy, the woman's friends poured forward to the open microphone, delivering stories of gifts and love they had received.

Roback concludes: "I felt some closure happened in the family. The testimonies from her friends expanded their view of their mother, and something shifted."

Lay chaplains cherish experiences like this, even if memorial services are the most difficult they must perform. (Generally, the weddings outnumber the memorials by about 10 to 1 – not to say that they don't contain challenges also.) Since lay chaplains aren't ministers, they bring their own life experience to the job, complemented by training they receive from the CUC (like the upcoming, November workshop in Vancouver on "The Challenging Memorial Service").

Vivianne LaRivière of Neighbourhood UU in Toronto was drawn to lay

chaplaincy, got trained, but had to take a deep breath when she got her first call – a memorial for a man who'd committed suicide.


Besides meeting the family and planning the service, LaRivière faced a personal hurdle – understanding and accepting a planned suicide by a father who suffered from depression, but was also a massage therapist and yoga practitioner. "I had to stand tall and say, 'I can own this,' and then try to grasp his outrageous darkness.

"If I didn't do another service, the richness of that one would be enough," says LaRivière, and then adds quickly, "although I don't know what's coming up, do I?"

A year ago, lay chaplain Clark Kenyon of the First UU Church of Winnipeg performed a memorial service for church member John Peters, because the congregation's minister was on sabbatical. "He was relatively young, at 46, and died suddenly. I immediately volunteered to help with his service." Kenyon was expecting 80–90 people at the service, but instead 240 showed up. "He had three or four communities of people who knew him, but none of us was connected to the others." In total, 12 people spoke during the "open sharing" at the heart of the service. "It was a wonderful celebration of his life," says Kenyon.

Nicoline Guerrier of the Unitarian Church of Montreal describes the intensity of a memorial service for lay chaplains. "You get a call, and then there are three or four days where you meet the family, then walk around living and breathing this person you've never met. You have to use all your intuitive skills, and find the hidden richness in every life."

LaRivière thinks of the people who don't get memorial services – like the thousands dying in recent natural disasters. Or even closer to her home – the 30,000 of 80,000 people who died in the Greater Toronto area last year and received no service of any kind.

"We're privileged," she says, "We need to be reminded of it, and share it." 

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Meet our amazing lay chaplains

Here are six diverse lay chaplains who are performing weddings, memorials and dedications across the country on behalf of their congregations.

KATHERINE ROBACK

Katherine Roback is in her fourth year of lay chaplaincy at the Unitarian Church of Vancouver. Her turning point came when she had to organize two memorial services for her mother in 1999, at both ends of the country. "It was so enriching and deepening," she says, that she decided to become a lay chaplain. (She's an anthropologist by training.)

She says that the real gift of the role is "in seeing the humility that comes with being close to the mysteries of life and growth." For instance, with regard to marriage, she says, "It's a divine accident when people find each other, I'm convinced of that!"

As a Unitarian, Roback feels she brings her "authenticity" to the job, "not to get boxed into any set template or 'should', but rather being present with the family or couple and finding

what's meaningful to them." In fact, she says she's inquisitive about the diversity of beliefs she finds. "My last wedding was earth-based; it was great to come up with something relevant to the couple."

MEREDITH SIMON

Prior to being asked by the Unitarian Church of Calgary to serve as a lay chaplain two years ago, Meredith Simon was a family practice physician, and she compares that work to what she does now.

"It's similar, with some differences," she says. "It's more immediately intense as a lay chaplain, because you must get to know people really quickly. In medicine, we're taught to maintain some degree of professional detachment, and it's the same as a lay chaplain, but I find this relationship a little less formal. You must become emotionally involved, without allowing yourself to be overwhelmed."

At a recent same-sex union ceremony, Simon helped the couple cope with less-than-enthusiastic support from one

of the families. "My role was to support, and help them not to have to justify their decision to the family."

CLARK KENYON

"There are a thousand volunteer jobs at church," observes Clark Kenyon, "but becoming a lay chaplain was the one that interested me. I knew I'd be capable of helping my congregation," something he's been doing for four years for the First UU Church of Winnipeg.

He believes that rites of passage are a "community building thing." He finds it easy to connect deeply into people's lives at the services he performs and adds, "it's quite an honour." It's also a break from his day job, in the Water and Waste Department of the city.

He finds that, "as an officiant, you can help set up the framework for a service, but it happens all on its own." When people come to him for a wedding, he says, "whether they have a kernel of an idea or a complete plan, I'll work with them, so that the service honours their path."

• see "Our Lay Chaplains" next page



When Aimée Ziegler was dedicated by lay chaplain Katherine Roback, her feet were placed in sand to connect her with the earth element, part of a blessing that also included fire (candle flame), air (an eagle feather wafted) and water (on the forehead).

PHOTOS: DALE ZIELGER





**Brian
Kiely**
CUC President

We are facilitators, not definers, of sacred ritual

It only took a few seconds. I was holding Finnegan's face in my hands while the vet injected the drug. As I looked deep into her eyes, I felt her pulse stop. It was so peaceful.

Finnegan had been my beagle companion for 12 years. She was sweet-natured, full of life and a great food scrounger. We joked that we would miss her most when we clean under the baby's high chair – something we didn't have to do before.

At first we thought she would recover. Then she stopped eating and started burrowing into closets. Animals know how to prepare. We made an appointment. The doctor assured us it was time. Perhaps because she was having a good day, it seemed a good time to say goodbye.

A little later the people who loved her gathered beside the river. Child and adult alike scattered handfuls of her ashes. As a final gesture, a grown-up gave my young daughter Lily a dog biscuit to float on the water. It was healing.

Life and death touches us all, whether it's family pets or family members, or even ourselves. When it comes, ritual helps us find peace.

Maybe the greatest service Unitarians offer our wider communities are the rites of passage offered by our ministers and lay chaplains. They are personalized, fitting and professionally accomplished, thanks to the training our lay chaplains receive.

We seem to understand that the most important thing at a wedding or memorial are the feelings and spirituality of the key people involved. In that role, we are facilitators of the sacred, not the definers of it.

This fall I will have a chance to co-lead a training session for lay chaplains in Edmonton. It will be an honour to help keep this great tradition alive.

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Our Lay Chaplains

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NICOLINE GUERRIER

Nicoline Guerrier is a social worker, and became a lay chaplain for the Unitarian Church of Montreal last year.

She believes that, "When people are real with each other in a deep sense, and that is witnessed by other people, then something sacred takes place."

Guerrier has performed 21 marriages this year, including quite a number of same-sex weddings, plus some ceremonies in French (Guerrier is fluently bilingual).

"I love the creation of ritual," she concludes. "It's unsatisfying to just do it by the book!"

VIVIANNE LARIVIÈRE

When Vivianne LaRivière heard a lay chaplain from her congregation speak about the program, "my heart just melted and I thought, that's what I want to do." She's now been a lay chaplain for two years and is considering the ministry.

She describes the two broad purposes of the program. The first is, "to get the word out into the community that extends beyond the congregation, about who we are and how we do things. You have a unique opportunity when you're doing a wedding with 100 guests." Secondly, "it's a spiritual

deepening for the lay chaplains."

Since LaRivière's Neighbourhood UU Congregation in east Toronto has its own minister, the lay chaplain officiates for outsiders who call seeking help with a ceremony. LaRivière is learning to find commonalities with the strangers she meets in this work. She concludes, "If you think you don't have something in common with another human being then you have yet to experience yourself."

DOREEN PEEVER

Doreen Peever has performed 162 weddings over the past two years, most of them same-sex marriages. Situated in St. Catharines, Ontario, she sees a steady stream of U.S. gays and lesbians who cross the border at Niagara Falls looking for a legal union. Counting the ceremonies she performed before equal marriage was legalized last year, Peever has officiated at 141 same-sex weddings.

She has also performed two weddings where one of the partners was transgendered. Does that pose any special challenges? "No," she says, "I treat everyone the same."

Peever, a veteran of the lay chaplaincy program with the Unitarian Congregation of Niagara, also does memorial services, child dedications, and even a house blessing and a pet funeral this year. **U**

