

Some History Regarding The Eventual Demise of the Lachine Presbyterian Congregation

A Look Back

In the mid 1990's St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Lachine called the Reverend Darryl Macdonald to be their minister. Darryl had graduated from the Presbyterian College in Montreal with top marks, been licensed by the Presbyterian Church and was recommended by the Head Office in Toronto as a promising candidate for the Lachine congregation.

It was when the Lachine congregation actually called Darryl to be their minister and Darryl announced himself as a gay man living in a committed relationship that the arrangement backfired. Darryl's license to preach was cancelled by the Presbyterian College and the congregation was told that they could not call him to ministry. The congregation was informed that if they continued with Darryl as their minister their membership in the *Presbyterian Church in Canada* would be withdrawn.

Many meetings ensued with the Montreal Presbytery, local supportive ministers and the media. In 1996 the Presbyterian General Assembly established a task force to research the issue, meet with congregations across the country (including the Lachine Presbyterians) and make a final recommendation. After two years of research and debates and appeals that spanned two meetings of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada (of 1996 and 1998) it was ruled by the governing body that the Presbyterian church decline the induction of gay and lesbian ministers. The assembly agreed with the task force and voted down any change to the interdiction on gay and lesbian ministers. Darryl's license to preach as a Presbyterian minister was withdrawn.

The Toronto Head Office of the Presbyterian Church in Canada then notified the Lachine congregation that it was no longer a Presbyterian church and its members were no longer Presbyterians and the church consequently lost their tax-exempt status.¹ The Lachine congregation registered as a separate congregation to regain their tax-free status.

At the next meeting of the general assembly in 1998 the revoking of Darryl Macdonald's license to preach as a minister in the Presbyterian Church in Canada was upheld by the governing body. Even after being stripped of the Presbyterian designation the Lachine congregation refused to abandon Darryl and went ahead and hired him as their minister.

The Lachine congregation tried to continue (having lost their tax-free status and with a dwindling congregation) ultimately had to give up their home church. The Lachine congregation whilst this was transpiring came to Summerlea United to share in it's facilities and worship space. Darryl continued to preach at Summerlea and became a valued presence and Darryl registered to complete his credentials as a qualified United Church of Canada minister as the two congregations grew closer and closer.

¹ At this point, and I hasten to add that this is my opinion and not in the notes (but implied therein) supplied to me by Ruth and Euan. I can't help but wonder how this kind of exclusion is justifiable in the Christian philosophy. Jesus did not turn his back on the Samaritan woman at the well. Far from it. We are told that he not only spoke to her (a scandal for a Jewish man) but he drank from her "unclean" (unclean because she was a Samaritan) and offered her his "Living Water."

Summerlea United ultimately became a stronger congregation with the continued presence of Darryl and the Lachine congregation as he continued to study and preach. Darryl is now a very successful minister at Roxboro United Church whilst many of the former members of St. Andrew's now attend Summerlea United and are active in the groups and activities at Summerlea. The Presbyterian Church in Canada's loss has been the gain of Summerlea United.

An underlying resentment can still be felt against the way in which loyal Christian Presbyterian members were treated by a Christian organization that preaches sisterly and brotherly love, recognition of all people as equals and forgiveness as a primary action for those in need.

The above history is – often verbatim – from the notes of Ruth and Euan Crabb formerly members of St. Andrew's Presbyterian and now both active and valued members of Summerlea United Church. The Presbyterian Church in Canada's loss and the United Church of Canada's gain. In the words of songwriter Pete Seeger in the song Where have All the Flowers Gone : "When will they ever learn?"

Some significant dates:

April 22, 2001: A Summerlea United Church congregational meeting approves by an 86% majority the proposal to St. Andrew's Presbyterian to share the existing Summerlea space. St. Andrew's Presbyterian will close their doors having lost their Presbyterian status by the end of May that year and Summerlea begins its journey to become an Affirming Congregation². **The Reverend Howard Clark**, minister of Summerlea at the time was the driving force behind this effort.

January 16, 2005: Summerlea United Church has its formal Covenanting Service in which the former St. Andrew's Presbyterian congregation is woven into the Summerlea United Church congregation in a moving special evening service (<http://www.summerlea.ca/en/2005covser.htm>). It should be noted that not all the former members of St. Andrew's made the move to the Summerlea congregation. See the Summerlea Website by following the link above or navigate to it from the Home Page by going to the **Gallery of Summerlea Folks and Events Past & Present** and looking at the year **2005** for the link to "St. Andrew's/Summerlea Covenanting Service". Also found in the Gallery is a page documenting St. Andrew's Final Meeting: <http://www.summerlea.ca/en/2005stamtg.htm> .

March 29, 2009: In a **Circle Meeting** the congregation Summerlea takes the last step in the process of becoming an **Affirming Ministry** by a congregational vote in which 74 ballots were cast with the results **68 in favour, 5 against and 1 abstention**: <http://www.summerlea.ca/en/2009folks/2009affirm.htm>. In their next meeting the **Congregational Board** formally recognized the decision and took the final step of amending the **Mission Statement** to read as follows:

² It is my (perhaps faulty) recollection that a promise of an Affirming Ministry process was a hope and condition of the now former Presbyterians. And it turned out to be a fascinating and rewarding journey. Well worth the trip.

The mission of Summerlea United Church is to love God, to support one another, to serve in God's world, to seek justice and to resist evil, and to proclaim Jesus Christ crucified and risen, our judge and our hope.

As an Affirming Ministry within the United Church of Canada, we are committed to building an inclusive faith community for all people regardless of age, race, ability, language, sexual orientation, gender identity or economic background. Our faithful action, as part of our outreach work, will include the support of refugees in our community as they seek to establish new lives in Canada

On a personal note I would add that this history, more than anything else, has me proud to be a member of Summerlea United Church in particular and the United Church of Canada in general. The "United" in our title has a deeper meaning because of this history. May we always be thus.