

Just over 16 years ago, I picked up a copy of the monthly United Church Observer magazine... opened it up... and read this:

McClure United Church is seeking a full-time diaconal or ordained minister to work in a team ministry. McClure is a large pastoral charge with a sizeable multi-purpose facility designed to meet the needs of an intergenerational congregation. There is a 14-story seniors' housing complex and a 21-unit intermediate care facility connected to the church. The candidate will be expected to work harmoniously with the pastoral staff of ordained minister and staff associate as well as with numerous auxiliary personnel and lay persons. The successful candidate will also be expected to assume primary responsibility for the church school and other programs that support families and children. McClure is particularly proud of its emphasis on outreach and its covenant and growing relationship with a nearby Roman Catholic Parish. The JNAC report is available from and resumes should be mailed to: Tom Kishchuk.

Now let me tell you that I was not looking for a new job... and even if I was, I had really no desire to minister in a congregational setting. I had specifically discerned a call to diaconal ministry because of its focus on outreach and education. I was happily living in Winnipeg... I was in the third year of my settlement ministry at Rainbow Ministry...an outreach ministry of Winnipeg Presbytery to the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community. I was doing what I loved – anti-homophobia education in congregations across Manitoba and outreach to the LGBT community.

My partner, Jordan, had also discerned a call to ministry and had been accepted at St. Andrew's College in Saskatoon. Our big picture plan was that she would move to Saskatoon for 3 years to receive the theological education she needed and then she would try to find an internship in or around Winnipeg. I had no intention of moving. I loved Winnipeg and I loved my job.

Why then... after having read this ad in the Observer, did I feel compelled to request a copy of the Joint Needs Assessment Report.

I told myself I was just curious... that's all. Not really interested, just curious.

So I received the report... which was quite extensive and very well organized... and I flipped to the ministry profile. Here I read about the amazing history of a congregation that had been planted on the East side of Saskatoon – had met in a high school auditorium and named themselves after Dr. Robert McClure – a courageous and outspoken medical missionary... a congregation with a commitment to honour their namesake by placing a strong emphasis on outreach ministry, dedicating 50% of their budget to outreach programs and projects. A congregation who was bold and brave... willing to dream big and to make their dreams a reality with a proposal for a major outreach project... a project that included a seniors housing complex attached to a multipurpose space... the space many of us are sitting in right now – a place of worship, a place for parties and dinners... entertainment... dinner theaters... exercise classes... conferences... and so much more.

Now all of that would be enough for most congregations – but not for McClure – After a decade and a half or so of living into their new space, the spirit began to do its work... another bold vision emerged and Amy McClure House came to life.

Next I found myself flipping to the ministry position description... I read that the primary responsibilities of the new minister were to be Faith Development – with a focus on developing programs and resources for children and families.

I also read in the skills profile that McClure was looking for someone who possessed a good sense of humour. In fact, the need for a sense of humour was mentioned several times in the report... which had me feeling quite curious.

So, I read all this and thought “Oh geez... that would be actually be kinda fun!”

But... I really wasn't ready for a change. So, I pushed it aside.

Now the funny thing about God... and the character of God's spirit... is that it is persistent... sometimes to the point of annoying. It sometimes seems as though the Spirit doesn't really care about what YOUR plan is... if it has something else in mind.

But I think what really happens is that God sees much deeper than we do... God sees through our self-doubt and fear... sees through all of our excuses... sees right into the longing of our hearts. And God view of our gifts and abilities is much more thorough and honest than our own. God sees even those things we are unable to recognize in ourselves... and sees the possibilities for where and when our gifts may best be used. And then... it's up to us recognize those possibilities when they are placed before us – it's up to us to actually say “yes”.

So, I did apply and I was called for an interview... I met with what seemed like the largest interviewing committee in the entire world... and, low and behold a few days later I received a call late in the evening from Tom Kishchuk, who was chairing the search committee. And I remember that the first thing he said was, “Laura, the search committee has one more question to ask”. I thought, “strange, but ok”. And very seriously he asked, “are you a fan of the blue bombers or the roughriders”. And I knew I was being offered the position. Using my most professional voice I thanked Tom, I accepted the offer, and we hung up the phone. Jordan and I were already in bed when the call came. Jordan was almost asleep... until I jumped to my feet screaming and crying and bouncing madly on the bed... so grateful that I had risked opening my heart and my mind to the spirit's tugging.

Now there is more of a point to this story than just reminiscing.

This story – is one of courage – vision – openness – risk... and love.

First... there's all the things I learned about McClure before I even came. And how wonderful it was that when I arrived in person for my interview, my experience of the people interviewing me... of Ron and Kent... and of this wonderful space – lined up with the words on the paper. Particularly the part about having a sense of humour. As nervous and tense as I was coming into the interview... I was very quickly put at ease by all the laughter around the table. And similarly, when I met with Ron and Kent the next day and watched as Kent lovingly teased Ron... and Ron's ears turned a beautiful shade of red... I felt like this was a place I could call home and people who I could grow to love.

And then the fact that I was even hired... was a pretty big risk and act of courage on the part of the search committee. I had practically no congregational experience. I'd never done a funeral or a wedding or a baptism – I'd only preached a handful of times. I did have some experience in ministry with children but even that was pretty limited.

And you hired me! Despite my lack of experience, you saw something in me that allowed you to risk giving me a chance. I don't know – maybe I was the only one who applied – but still... you gave me a chance.

Over the last 16 years you have given me chance after chance after chance – you've listened to my ideas – supported most of them – you've allowed me to grow in my identity as a minister – develop skills, express my creativity – learn how to love more deeply – more openly. You've definitely allowed me to use my sense of humour.

You've also provided a space for me to settle down – establish some roots.

Before coming to McClure, the longest I had ever lived in one place for my entire life was 5 years. 16 years in one place was unimaginable to me.

But longevity is not unusual here. There are very, very few congregations who hold onto their ministers as long as McClure. Dale Morrison and Joan Brown were

here for a very long time... and really, they still are since they've both moved into McClure Place. Same with Kent who was here for 10 years.... and Ron for 19... and now Debra – already here for 11 years . We stay because of you...

And supporting me and the other ministers I've teamed with is not the only way you have lived your faith. Your care for us is just a tiny piece of what makes you exceptional.

Over the years I have witnessed the way you welcome newcomers, support and participate in outreach opportunities across the city, the country and the world – too many outreach programs and projects to even begin naming. You have not only financially supported many, many refugee folks over the years – you have loved them – become family for some of them. You supported a group of youth who travelled to Nicaragua and a few years later an intergenerational group also to Nicaragua. You were one of the first churches to approve a same gender marriage policy and a few years later voted to become an Affirming Ministry – deciding to be explicit in sharing God's love with those in the lgbtq+ community. And now, most recently, you have welcomed some struggling rural congregations into your midst – giving them hope and easing their worry about Sunday morning leadership.

There are so many things... so many ways you have opened yourselves to the spirit's movement – to God's call – to the way of Christ – with courage, faith and good humour.

All of that was true long before I arrived on the scene and will continue to be true long after I am gone. I am just grateful to have been here for a piece of it.

Those of you who were here on the Sunday my letter of resignation was read or who read it in the weekly email, will know that my reason for leaving was not because I was tired of you... or because I was upset about anything – or because I'd lost my sense of humour. I discerned it was time to leave because I did not

feel called to my ministry position as it had shifted into one of more preaching. I couldn't muster the energy and enthusiasm necessary to preach on a regular basis. I have appreciated your expressions of support for my preaching... and I'm glad you have been able to get something out of my words – but doing something well and doing something with joy and integrity aren't necessarily the same thing. I felt that spirit nudging – pushing... pulling... and there came a moment when I knew I needed to practice what I preached – “to be open to the call of God – even if I'm scared – even if I feel inadequate – even if I don't quite understand it.” It's the right thing for me – and I truly believe it's also the right thing for this community.

There will be another minister somewhere, who will be casually flipping through the vacant ministry ads... and they too will stop and take another look. They will see the love of God shine through this community and will be compelled to send in their resume. And they will be so blessed by their call to serve among you.

Now listen... I know things have not been easy for this community – just as they have been difficult for many faith communities and other community organizations too. Times have been tough for many of us. We are still in a pandemic – even though it seems to be quietly moving in the background. We have experienced a collective trauma – we've been exposed to so much fear and worry – there's been conflict – in homes, in our communities... around the world. People are tired – and I know when I'm tired that I'm less patient... I'm easier to anger... I'm more distracted... and all I really feel like doing is swaddling up in a cocoon with my favourite blanket and watching a movie – usually eating chocolate.

And when we are tired, it is sooooo hard to think about taking risks and being courageous. Follow Christ? Listen to God? Unless Christ is leading me to my bed and God is calling me to take a nap – not really interested.

But... we CAN NOT allow ourselves to live like that.

Don't get me wrong – self-care is good. It is so important for us to strengthen our resiliency and we can do that by using self-care tools to de-stress, decompress and wind down from the highs and lows life throws our way. Introspection is a good thing. But like most good things, we need to find balance.

There's this website called "The Resilience Resource" ... so much great information about how to equip ourselves for the bumps and bruises of life. In an article about self-care, I read this:

"Each one of us on The Resilience Resource team is a persistent advocate for self-care; those regular and rhythmic practices that maintain physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health. It is vital for personal resilience that one recognize tools that can be used to de-stress, decompress, and wind down from the highs and lows of life. Intentional routines and disciplines of work, play, and rest build vital resilience capacity and are a crucial support for an individual's ability to cope with crisis and trauma.

There is a quiet, dark side of self-care. A rhetoric that slides very quickly down the all too slippery slope into the well of narcissism and selfishness. This side creates a perspective of introspective focus that stops someone from reaching out in service to the needy, hinders the building of new relationships, or inhibits the hard work of resolving conflict in the pursuit of comfort, ease, and protection of self against over-exertion. When these things happen, self-care becomes not only ineffective, but counterintuitive to its purpose. It can actually cause harm to body, mind, and soul rather than bring healing.

The motivation underlying self-care practices must focus on investing more in others. If I consistently have the mindset that I am keeping myself healthy so that I can give again, then my self-care tools will have their desired effect. However, if attempts at self-care come from a place of self-focused drive to hoard mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual resources for personal comfort and ease, the result will be loss of purpose and meaning in life."

When we are tired, stressed, frustrated... it's easy to forget the purpose and meaning of our lives. So how about writing it down? Your personal mission statement. Stick it on your fridge – put it on your mirror - paste it on the wall in front of the toilet. My personal mission statement is “Go. Be. Love. God needs you.” I have it tattooed right here as a reminder. I am never going to live it completely 100% perfectly. That's not even my goal. My goal is 50%. If 50% of the time I remember this as my purpose – I'm doing well. And there might be times when I can't give 50%... so 10% may be all I can do... and that's fine, for a while. But I never want to stay there and I never want to let it get below 10%.

The Mission Statement for McClure United Church is this...

“McClure United Church, as a Christian community of faith, participates in the worship of God, in study and service to others. The people, enabled by the Spirit of God, reflect God's love by their attitudes and actions”.

That's you... you are McClure United Church. It's not just the ministers... it's not just the board chair... or the board... or the committee members... or even just those who participate in worship on Sunday morning – its everyone who calls McClure United Church their church. Even if we're just “sort of” your church. Its everyone who feels too old to do anything of value and everyone who feels too young to make much of a difference. Its everyone who is too busy to really get involved and everyone who is too shy to join. If everyone who is somehow connected to this community gave 10% to our mission – 10% to reflecting God's love by your attitudes and actions – we would be a powerhouse of faith and love.

And the worst thing anyone can do – personally or as a community... the very worst thing is to give up or stop caring or become so introspective that you disappear. I know McClure as a community is a long way from that place... but I also believe that some of our community members are not so far off. So, if you don't really feel YOU need... or are able to... to show up and do God's work for yourself... do it for them. Do it for the ones who are close to the edge of despair.

All of the amazing things that called me to McClure are still very much a part of your identity. I'm certain the new ministry profile being created in search of another minister will reflect that. So, when you are feeling tired... or frustrated... or worried about the budget – remember that – the core of your identity is one of bold vision and courage... it is one of reaching out into the community to share God's love – to meet God's people wherever they are.

You have so much to offer and whoever replaces me is a very lucky person.

So, I haven't really said anything yet about the scripture passage for today. It's all about prayer.

Pray is good.

I think we should do it.

No seriously... prayer works.

It may not always work the way we wish it would – but it works at the very least, to help us feel connected to a power greater than ourselves.

So, if you don't believe in the power of prayer to make a difference in the world... think of it as an opportunity to chat with God. It can be one of those self-care tools I mentioned earlier.

Take time... as often as you remember... to say "hey God" ... and take a deep breath of God's love that is all around you...

Then breathe it out – into the world. That can be part of your 10%.

May it be so.