

Keeping the Faith in Alberta

*When the closet door opens, the church doors generally shut,
writes Debbie Culbertson*

A pile of doors is stacked like rectangular pancakes in the centre of Edmonton's Latitude 53 Art Gallery. No door is given pride of place: porch doors, bedroom doors, back doors, farmhouse doors, kitchen doors, office doors lie together democratically, only sides and hinges revealing their differences.

"The doors are no longer doors, they are bygone objects, a tabula rasa," gushes the note accompanying the display. This is nonsense. A door is never a clean slate—it carries the history of those who have touched it, leaned against it, rammed it open or slammed it shut.

I know this from experience. My personal history has been recorded on the wood and steel of back doors, mail slots, college archways and revolving doors. But the doors that tell the most painful and joyful stories are the doors to closets and churches.

In July 1996, I open a new door and shut one firmly behind me. My two children—Rachel and Jonathan—and I move from Ontario to live with my new partner in rural Alberta. I leave behind a four-hour daily commute to Toronto and most of my birth family. Cattails and wetlands, the shade of poplar and pine, replace the concrete and steel that make up my birthplace.

The first few weeks in Alberta are easy. We unpack and arrange decades' worth of hand-me-down furniture and knick-knacks—an easy chair with corset stays tucked under the seat, a large square rocker, china foxes in red waistcoats. But in the last few boxes, I find the hymnbooks



and thick family Bibles. And feel homesick for the first time. We may have a new roof over our heads, but our spirits are as untethered as a door without a hinge.

Summer, 1966

I pull on my green cotton dress with the puffed sleeves, black patent shoes and white straw hat. It is a sweltering hot Sunday morning. In the living room of our grey stucco house, my father brushes his best black suit. From their privileged place on our black and white television set, two china foxes watch my mother pouf her hair and dab Evening in Paris behind her ears. We walk three city blocks to church, past Andy's Corner Store with its glass candy case, past the salami smells of Wolfe's Delicatessen and across the railroad tracks that cut the steaming cement sidewalk. Sweat has transformed the back of my dress into a second skin. I pull on my mother's hand. Can't she hurry faster? When we finally open the heavy church doors we are enveloped in a rush of cool air. My impatience evaporates along with the sweat on my back.

As the first fall in our new home approaches, my partner and I decide to go church shopping. We scan the ads on the religion page of the *Edmonton Journal* for a church supportive of blended families, with a good Christian education program and a commitment to social justice issues. However, unlike most couples, we have an extra concern. We are lesbian, and in conservative Alberta we want a church supportive of homosexuals and their families.

At first, the task seems daunting. Heather, my partner, is a Mennonite. The only Mennonite congregation in Alberta

that openly accepts gays and lesbians is in Calgary, three hours away. My own faith community, the United Church of Canada, voted to allow gay and lesbian ordination in 1988. Yet today, eight years later, no United Church in Alberta has publicly declared that it welcomes homosexuals. In fact, in the wake of the 1988 decision, some Alberta congregations have passed motions against ever knowingly hiring a gay or lesbian minister.

Since there is unlikely to be an accepting church in the rural area where we live, we look in Edmonton, a 40-minute drive away. Heather calls the presbytery office for advice. (A presbytery is the governing body that oversees churches in a particular region.) She asks: "Which city congregations are supportive of gays and lesbians?" The woman who answers the phone says that she will call us back with an answer. After days without a return call, Heather phones again. The answer is as short and sharp as a screen door slamming. "I'm sorry, I can't help you."

*This is the church
This is the steeple
Open the doors
And see all the people.*

We wonder how many churches we will have to visit before we find one that will welcome us. I phone the office of Alberta-Northwest Conference, the next organizational level in the United Church. "Try the congregation I attend," says staff person Gail Glover. A few Sundays later, we open the glass and chrome doors of the sunny gymnasium in which the congregation meets. We don't realize it right away, but our church shopping is over.

Southminster-Steinhauer United Church was established on Edmonton's suburban south side in the 1960s and 70s, the product of an amalgamation of two liberal churches. Born in the flower power decades, its founders wanted to establish a "church without walls"—a place where people pooled money to give to the poor, not to buy new carpeting for the vestry. "We consciously made a decision not to build (a church), because we wanted to put our money into outreach," says Wilda Hurst.

Wilda and her husband lived and worked in Alabama in the late 1950s, witnessing great poverty and racial discrimination. When the couple returned to Canada, they wanted to be part of a church that championed the needy. Southminster-Steinhauer fit the bill. The congregation worshipped in school gymnasiums and community centres. Committees met in living rooms and "outreach" meant carrying signs in protest marches and establishing support programs for seniors.

As years passed, the people filling the plastic chairs in the gym began coming to the church to find support, rather than give it. Long-time volunteers burned out and ministers were hired. Members of other churches began to scoff at the idea that Southminster-Steinhauer was anything but

a wealthy congregation that had settled into comfortable middle age, leaving its peace signs to gather dust.

Fall, 1985

Feet dangling over the arm of my heavy wooden rocker, I am reading a book called Why I Am Not a Christian, by Bertrand Russell. I am struck by his eloquent prose and coherent arguments against faith in a greater power than we. In the end, it doesn't convince me. I drop the book to the floor and go into the kitchen to make tea. As the water boils, I look out of my window at the stars shining above the glass towers of Bay and Yonge. Even in the heart of Toronto, Russell can't explain away the birdsong I hear when I open the door to my fire escape. If there is no God, then why do passion, hope and dreams emerge like spring run-off in a place carpeted with concrete? The kettle runs dry. I fill it again.

Heather and I attend church regularly. Rachel and Jonathan establish themselves in Sunday school and youth group. We introduce ourselves to others as a couple and as a family. Parents and friends of gays and lesbians stop us in the church hallway and make it clear they are happy to have us there. After nearly two years at Southminster, another "out" gay couple—Read Sherman and Stefan Lemelin—begin to attend the congregation, and we start to feel less alone.

Despite the warm handshakes and smiles, there are still many things that make clear that our lives as lesbians are invisible in this place. During worship, Rev. Bob Hetherington offers prayers for people facing all kinds of challenges—illness, death, job loss, war and hunger. A multitude of "isms"—racism, sexism, classism—are named and we are challenged to overturn these "principalities." But homophobia and heterosexism are absent from the litany.

Even in this welcoming place, we hesitate to name our absence from the content of worship or to name our experience for others. We have had other church doors slammed in our faces because of whom we love. Some years before, Heather attended a Mennonite church in northern Alberta. After a close family member "outed" her to the board of that church, four church council members paid Heather a visit. Seated at her kitchen table, drinking the coffee she had prepared for them, they told Heather that she was no longer welcome to teach Sunday school, preach or contribute to the church in any other way, except to clean the bathrooms.

On a crisp fall day in 1985, I am struggling to open the thick wooden doors of the University of Toronto's Hart House, which contains the university men's fitness club recently opened to women. An elderly male friend of the family tells me that the original founder and benefactor of the club, Hart Massey, had asked that the doors to the "house" be made

extra heavy “to keep the ladies out.”

I am in my first year at Emmanuel College at U of T. I am part of the first freshman class in which women outnumber men. We are a new breed in religious studies, a bluejean-clad group of earnest young women who embrace the overly optimistic claim that “Jesus was a feminist.” We debate theology and feminist theory as though our very lives depend on the strength of our analysis. Some will eventually wear clerical robes. Others, like myself, will choose different vocations.

Here too, in the stone hallways and lecture theatres, I meet—for the first time—women and men who openly identify themselves as lesbian and gay. Most of them have little hope of becoming ordained ministers. Yet these Ruths and Naomis, Davids and Jonathans flout tradition and romance one another under the frowning portraits of divinity school principals. I wonder what these stern-looking men would say if they knew how many fast and steamy couplings take place behind the thick wooden doors of the college’s private chapel.

“In biblical times, doors were used for signs of deliverance, an access route for hope...” *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*

When Mieke Wharton plays the piano at Southminster-Steinhauer, she often seems far away. Between hymns she sits quietly, hands folded in her lap, eyes fixed on the light playing on the hallway beyond our worship space. I sometimes wonder if she is thinking of her mother—Gien—another gifted musician. Mieke has shown me pictures of her mother and told me stories about Gien’s bravery in wartime Holland. The stories capture my imagination, unrolling in my mind like a 1940s film.

Gien stands by the piano, one hand holding little Mieke on her hip, the other lightly fingering the silent white keys. Before the war, she and Frits gathered with friends around the gleaming walnut piano and sang songs celebrating the golden grain of the farmer’s fields. But since the Nazis marched into Holland, there is a new, star-shaped sea of yellow in Amsterdam, hastily sewn onto jackets and dresses. She no longer has a taste for sweet words and folk music. Today the small living room with its white lace curtains seems claustrophobic. She steps out onto the third-floor balcony connecting their apartment to that of their friend and landlord, Jan Snellebrand. His balcony door is open, as always, and she sees his tall, slender figure leaning against the wooden railing. A cool breeze stirs the purple and red flowers in the low wooden boxes that divide his side of the balcony from theirs. Jan turns and looks toward her, gravely tipping his brown felt fedora as though they had just met in the street. She smiles and for a moment, feels free.

Gien Meyer’s maiden name was Cohen, and she was a Jew passing as a gentile during the Nazi occupation. “The

Germans announced that all Jews in Holland had to wear a yellow star,” says Mieke. “But my mother chose not to wear it.” Gien knew the price of disclosure: early in the war, her parents were murdered in the death camps. “My aunt gave my mother her identification papers,” says Mieke. “This worked well, because my aunt was unmarried, and of course had the same last name as my father.”

The Meyers developed an escape route in case Gien’s secret was discovered. “Our landlord was the only person outside of our family who knew that my mother was Jewish,” says Mieke. “He always kept the door on his side of the balcony unlocked. If the soldiers came to get her, she was to slip into his house, put on a disguise he had made for her and go out through his front door.”

Fortunately, Gien Meyer never had to use this escape route. Jan Snellebrand always kept her secret. Mieke, born in 1939, on the knife-edge of the genocide, only learned of her mother’s heritage after the war was over. “When I found out, she asked me not to tell anyone about my Jewish ancestry, because she was still afraid,” says Mieke.

In 1964, Mieke married Malcolm Wharton, a Canadian farmer. Together the couple raised two children—Ann and Steve (not their real names). Steve was a stormy child with a volatile temper. In his 20s, he went to university and began to share a home with a male friend. Despite what are now obvious clues to Malcolm and Mieke, both were surprised when their son finally told them he was gay.

Although Steve wanted Mieke and Malcolm to know he was gay, he wanted to keep the closet door shut. He asked his parents not to tell others about his orientation and discouraged them from “making an issue of it.” But the knowledge changed their lives. Today Malcolm and Mieke attend protests, write letters and support others who work for acceptance and equality. They tell Steve they will continue to advocate for gays and lesbians, with or without his support.

The Whartons’ actions have emerged out of a heartfelt belief that only active and open resistance can keep a future holocaust at bay. The balcony door must be kept open. When asked why her parents’ non-Jewish landlord supported them, Mieke is silent for a moment. “After the war I learned that he was gay...”

June, 1995

Dear Mum: This is one of the hardest letters I have ever written you. But I can’t hide who I am any longer. I am lesbian. I am in love with another woman and I need you to know that this is who I am. If you reject me because I am gay, then I will have to accept your decision. But I cannot and will not change who I am. I love you and I hope you will understand and still love me. Debbie
When I drop the letter in the mail slot it makes no sound. But inside, my heart is beating so hard I think it will break through my skin. A few days later, the phone rings. “Of course I love you and I always will,” says my mother.

A new subcommittee has been born at Southminster-Steinhauer. The affirm committee is the result of coffee klatch discussions, numerous phone calls and much soul searching. The first meeting is held at Sandi and Jim Lockhart's suburban home. Sandi is a nurse, Jim a retired agriculturalist. They are what my mother used to call the "movers and shakers" in the church. Movers and shakers are easily identified: they are on more than one committee, rarely miss a Sunday and make sure everyone brings the right dish to the potluck dinners.

About 20 people arrive for that first meeting, and attendance rarely drops below that in the months ahead. As the coffee pot sputters we learn about one another. Mr. Hetherington is there. So is a former minister who was once harassed by members of his congregation after he openly supported the 1988 decision allowing gay ordination. Four people in the group are homosexual. At least six people, including Malcolm and Mieke Wharton, are the parents or relatives of lesbians and gays. Others, like Wilda Hurst, are long-time social justice advocates. They have marched in protests, served at food banks, sponsored refugees and lobbied politicians. Most are over 50 years old. Many are retired.

Before long, the committee defines its purpose: to educate the congregation about gay and lesbian issues and eventually challenge the church to publicly affirm that it welcomes gay and lesbian people, their friends and families. But then the question is asked. "I think of our church as a welcoming place," says Ann, a longtime member of Southminster. "Why do we need to make a public declaration that we accept everyone when we're already doing that?"

Ann was one of the first people to grasp our hands in welcome when we first attended Southminster. Her question is inevitable, raised from the point of view of one who is open-minded and committed to fairness. But for Heather and me, it rips open a barely healed wound—our struggles to find a church, knowing from experience that we couldn't be sure of whether or not we would find a welcome.

During our first summer in Alberta, Rachel makes friends with a girl who lives a less than a kilometre down the road. Like a New Age Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer, they are inseparable. With torn butterfly nets slung over their shoulders, they go in search of minnows, discover salamanders under rocks and listen to the rattle of cattails and the orchestra of frogs.

One day, Rachel whams open the back door and tearfully announces her new friend is no longer allowed to visit our home. She cannot come for sleepovers, nor share meals with us. After we calm Rachel down, Heather and I take a walk

over to the girl's house. When her mother answers the door, we are not invited over the threshold. The woman tells us that a mutual acquaintance informed her we are lesbians. She is angry Heather and I had not "warned" her about our orientation. "I didn't think you two were lesbians, because you said you were Christian."

Each Sunday, Iva and John Wood sit in the same chairs in the same row in the gym. John is tall and slender, but his back is bent like a birch tree after a spring snowfall. When we pass the peace—the regular mid-worship greeting time—his hands shake with the crippling effects of Parkinson's disease. Iva shows us an old black and white photo of the two of them, taken nearly 40 years ago when John was ordained as a United Church minister. Those were the days when young people like John and Iva lived and breathed the

social Gospel. Now in their 70s, they haven't forgotten the message of radical love they preached and taught for decades.

During coffee hour after worship, Iva and John are angry. "I don't know why some people can't accept gay people," says Iva, shaking her curly white hair. "Can't they see you're just as much of a family as anyone else?" We are discussing the Delwyn Vriend case. Vriend is the quiet spoken young man who lost his job at an Alberta college because he is gay. When the Alberta human rights commission refused to investigate his discrimination complaint, Vriend fought back. Now, in letters to the editor and radio phone-in shows, people are using the Bible—our spiritual touchstone, as well as theirs—



to legitimize their hatred of gays and lesbians. At night, our dreams are filled with images of books burning and people being dragged from their homes. Our spirits are as painfully bent as John's back. He smiles at us and gives us both a fragile hug.

"Randy Thorsteinson, leader of the Alberta Social Credit Party, urged Klein to 'display moral leadership' by invoking the notwithstanding clause. He said protecting gays and lesbians from discrimination could legitimize pedophilia, erode parents' rights and pave the way for recognition of same-sex marriages." —"Religious Groups Urge Government to Defy Ruling," Edmonton Journal, April 3, 1998

Chatting and laughing in the spring sunshine, we feel more like attendees at a church picnic than at a church picket. Where once suffragists Nellie McClung and Louise McKinney walked, we are making a pilgrimage to the seat of provincial power. About twenty of us from Southminster-Steinhauer stand shoulder-to-shoulder with drag queens and office workers, pink-haired 20-somethings and construction workers. We are here to support Delwyn Vriend. The province's human rights commission refused to investigate Vriend's dismissal because prejudice against gays and lesbians was not covered in then-current legislation. He challenged that refusal, eventually taking his case to the Supreme Court of Canada. The most powerful judges in the country agreed with Vriend. They ruled that protection from homophobia must be read into Alberta's human rights legislation.

Unfortunately, the ruling of the highest court in the land is not enough for Alberta's Christian right. In vitriolic letters dripping with condemnation, they lobby Premier Ralph Klein to invoke the "notwithstanding clause," a provision in the Constitution that gives provincial legislatures the right to opt out of national legislation when it appears to impede their interests.

In front of the closed wooden doors of Alberta's stately legislature buildings, we cheer and clap, as speaker after speaker demands the government refrain from overturning the Supreme Court decision. Our signs say "Christians for human rights," "Hatred is not a family value," and "Southminster-Steinhauer United Church supports gays and lesbians" in rainbow letters. And when Bruce Miller, a local United Church minister, speaks to the crowd, we are, for one shining moment in this tarnished debate, proud to be Christian.

Finally, January 31, 1999, arrives—the day of the church's annual general meeting. More than 100 people stay after services to make decisions about the direction of the church. On the table is a motion that Southminster-Steinhauer become an affirming congregation where persons of all sexual orientations are welcome. Heather and I are tense. Like Martin Luther, the founder of

Protestantism, we have nailed our faith to the church door and are waiting for a response.

The church has changed so much. At Christmas, the congregation gathered personal care items for people living with HIV and AIDS. Bob Hetherington now wears a rainbow-coloured ribbon on his clerical robes and openly refers to gay and lesbian concerns in sermons and prayers.

Over the past year, members of the affirming committee held educational events raising gay and lesbian concerns with the congregation. During after-worship lunches, Sandi and Jim Lockhart stood behind groaning tables, serving up bowls of steaming tomato vegetable soup, while other members of the group showed videos about gays and lesbians in the church. After the sessions, we find slips of paper in our cardboard "question box."

Today, those questions have faces. One man stands and asks pointedly, "If we include bisexuals as part of our resolution, aren't we permitting promiscuity?" Another man asks, "Why do we need to do this? Won't this cause people to leave the church? Do we want to take that risk?" Perhaps the hardest question comes from someone I admire very much. He asks, "What if this leads to gay marriage?"

I can't keep silent. I say, "Whenever I walk with my partner on the street, I can't hold her hand for fear we will be harassed or harmed. Where is the church for me? I hope that someday I will be able to marry Heather in the church, because I love her. Why shouldn't the church be there for us in our commitment?" Some people clap and cheer. These are friends—they understand how hard this is for us. Every gay and lesbian in that room, every friend and family member is asking for the church to stand with us. We are deeply afraid that in this sacred place we will be rejected.

There are many more things said, but there is just a roar in my ears. I am Christian. I am gay. This is my place. The message comes back loudly and clearly. Southminster-Steinhauer—suburban, comfortable, radical—opens the door. The motion is carried with only three people opposed.

On Saturday, November 13, 1999, the doors of the church are wide open. A cool autumn breeze disperses the scent of red roses on the centre table. Today is our covenanting day. We recite a poem from Di Brandt's collection *Jerusalem, beloved*, and, with the 100 people gathered together, say a litany based on the biblical *Song of Songs*. Read Sherman sings *Veni Sancte Spiritus* accompanied by a Mennonite choir. Carolyn McDade's *There Is a Time* is joyfully sung by the Southminster-Steinhauer choir.

With tears streaming, we make vows to love one another for the rest of our lives. Jonathan and Rachel read scripture, and our friends give and take the wine and bread of holy communion. A legal court may never recognize the pledges we make this day. But our covenant is blessed by a greater Judge, and we have faith it will endure.

Debbie Culbertson is an Alberta writer and editor.