

On Pioneering

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Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you ... and I will bless you." (Genesis 12:1–3)

*Do not follow where the path may lead. Go instead
where there is no path and leave a trail.
(Harold R. McAlindon)*

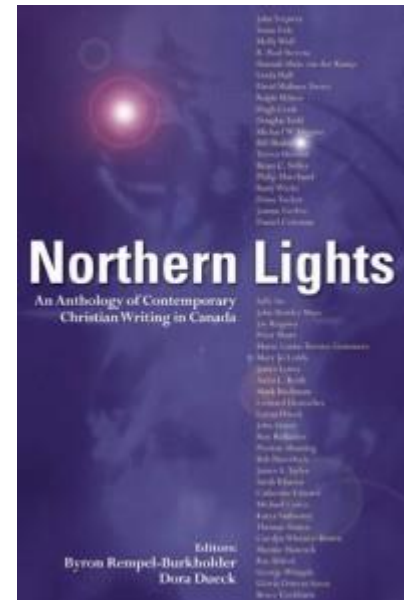
One day my book editor told me that I'm affectionately called the "Hyphenated One" at his office. I sighed. Even after living in Canada for nearly thirty years, I still have to fight to keep my long name. I had a medical appointment recently. "Marie Ternier, please," the receptionist called out in the waiting area.

I didn't recognize my name, and she called a second time. "Marie Ternier, please." I got up. "The name is Marie-Louise, with a hyphen," I said, "and Ternier-Gommers, with another hyphen. Computers hate my name, but truly, I'm never called Marie." The receptionist barely took note of my speech. I went home and mused. What's next? I wondered. Thoughts of a life spent pioneering bubbled up ...

Getting married is a major move in anyone's life, but I compounded the matter by marrying a man from far, far away, from a place no one knew. "What in the world has she found in Canada, so far away from everywhere?" friends and family were thinking when I returned home to the Netherlands with an engagement ring on my finger. They were thinking "immigrants, pioneering, adventure." I assured folks that the country was by now well-developed and quite with the times—by no means as rugged as some Dutch settlers had found it decades earlier. The pioneering was done, I said, and I would simply reap the fruits of the sweat and blood those settlers had shed to open up the West. '

They might have believed me had I not shown them a photograph of a house—on a truck—and announced I was going to live there. A house on a truck being moved some twenty- five kilometres to be plunked on the slope of a small hill in the Saskatchewan Parklands, at the end of a gravel road, by a lake. By Dutch standards this was synonymous with "the boonies" and meant to my mother that the earth was indeed flat as a pancake and that her daughter was about to perch on its very edge—the end of the world.

In marrying Jim, I also married a country, a culture, and a lifestyle. But the excitement of new beginnings was electric. We were going to make a difference in the world—as a married couple, as Catholic Christians, as Saskatchewan farmers. We were not comfortable with adopting unquestioned middle-class, materialistic values nor did we think of farming as agribusiness. The rebel in us pushed us into countercultural choices. This was pioneering in reverse: from a consumer lifestyle with all conveniences back to a life of voluntary



simplicity, the basics. The prison of modern living looked more suffocating to us than the time-consuming and labour-intensive activities of hauling water from the lake, growing and preserving our own food, and chopping wood for cooking and heating. William McNamara's spirituality, as described in the book *Mystical Passion*, became real for us:

I share the secret of the child, of the saints and sages, as well as of clowns and fools when I realize how wondrous and marvelous it is to carry fuel and draw water. Once the spiritual significance of such ordinary earthy acts dawns on me, I can skip the yoga and koans, the mantras and novenas.

We gardened organically and sold vegetables at the local farmer's market. This focus eventually shifted into growing organic garden seeds for sale. I learned all about preserving our winter supply of food and about baking bread using the wood stove – things that were not part of my upbringing. We even used a natural method of family planning by observing body symptoms and charting body temperature – our three lovely children were very planned. For nearly 20 years we lived close to the earth and in harmony with the rhythms of nature. At 19, our daughter wrote to us about her gratitude to her “non-materialistic, simple living, happy, grateful and generous parents” and went on to list all the values she had learnt in her growing-up years. Not bad for a couple of idealistic hippies...

My parents' goal in life was to get away from the "deprived" life in order to offer the next generation more material comfort and affluence. One becomes a “pioneer” in order to improve one's material lot in life, not to reverse it, or so the popular understanding implies. And so my parents never understood the strange kind of freedom and independence that comes with freely choosing this simple back-to-the-land existence.

Pioneering at its core is really about that – to discover a new way not as an end in itself, but in order to live in freedom, physically, mentally, socially, and spiritually. Cultural and social conformity is the antithesis of pioneering. That is why so many who are considered “pioneers” are individuals who step outside the norm, who don't fit in any box, whose vision is larger and wider than what presents itself as the horizon, whose faith in a bigger picture leaves them so restless that they have to step off the beaten track.

I stepped off the beaten track, all right, in more ways than one. My twenty eight years of marriage to Jim have been marked by blessing and pain. Taking charge of our own health through choices in lifestyle and working the land paid off in more ways than economically. What a rich feeling when freezer and sealers were full of home-grown food and when \$100.00 lasted longer than a week! Even our choice in family planning (Serena – Natural Family Planning) was in sync with the rest of our lives.

Despite our own attempts to live a “pioneering” life in response to the Gospel call to live fully, we were perceived as odd. Within our rural prairie Catholic parish we were considered lop-sided hippies – back to the landers who attend church?! Local “real” back-to-the-landers viewed us with suspicion; after all, we had not turned our back on all of society nor to the institutional church. Again, I wondered: what is pioneering and who defines what it is?

As the children grew older, I became interested in going to school. Pioneering of a very different sort beckoned: good Catholic girl off to university – a Lutheran Seminary to be

precise! – at age 35 while raising three children and living a two hour commute away. Spurred on by a desire to obtain more knowledge and training in pastoral counseling, I literally devoured all theology, liturgy and church history classes. The hunger to learn about the things of God had laid dormant for several decades. Walking into the classes on theology, liturgy and spirituality reawakened the old flame. It felt new, exciting and ... familiar. Little did I know that another unexpected turn in the road would lead me into yet more uncharted territory.

This time it was a course on preaching that held the pioneering surprise. I was reluctant and impatient at first, not seeing new potential at all. I even felt slightly annoyed that such a class was required for my degree. Just as Sarah did when overhearing the strangers say that she will have a son in her old age (Gen. 18:9-12), I laughed in secret at the absurdity of the situation. Here I was, a Roman Catholic woman, learning from the Lutherans how to preach God's Word in the pulpit! I thought the combination ludicrous. I would probably not learn very much, let alone ever use such learning. To top off the absurdity of the situation, the professor was an ordained Lutheran woman, the first ordained woman I ever faced in such a close encounter.

But a pioneer has his/her heart always open to new possibilities, however absurd they may seem at first. And so, crazy as it felt, the question began to surface as to whether I had a call to preach. I was raised in a church tradition where there was no expectation, let alone possibility, that preaching could ever be part of my ministry. Until this class, the Catholic climate had kept such a question safely at bay.

I discovered that church structures greatly affect our experience of God's call and our ability to respond to that call. If church structures do not permit the experience of being called by God either to preaching and/or to ordained ministry, and do not permit the discernment and the response to such a call, then such questions may not necessarily surface directly in a person's consciousness. For the first time ever, I started wondering if this is what happens when a Roman Catholic woman dares to claim being called by God to preach and/or to ordained ministry. Once again, the notion of "pioneering" was slowly being written all over this alluring journey.

Now an ecclesial pioneer, my voice was changing and my heart began to hear new songs. I was desperately looking for new ways to "sing," even though I remained uncertain about how, where and when to sing. Does a real pioneer always know exactly what lies beyond the horizon? One of our text books, *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians*, by Helmut Thielicke proved immeasurably helpful: "During the period when the voice is changing we do not sing, and during this formative period in the life of the theological student he/she does not preach." These words gave me permission to let the process take its course without the pressure of needing to share answers I did not yet have. For now, remaining faithfully rooted in God and prayerfully alert to the inner movements was sufficient. I prayed and learned, learned and prayed, continuously offering to God the deep stirrings of my heart.

After graduation, I worked as editor for a Canadian Catholic family magazine. At the same time, and much to my own surprise, I quickly became the local supply preacher-in-residence for the Anglicans, the Lutherans, the United Church folks, the Presbyterians, and

even for the Mennonites and the Worldwide Church of God. An even greater surprise awaited me when the pulpit in my own Catholic parish opened up when we conducted our own Sunday service of the Word with communion (our priest had six parishes!). My preaching became a vehicle for ecumenical ministry and offered a glimpse of the increasing lay involvement in pastoral and liturgical leadership, both unprecedented in my neck of the woods. Forging a way through preaching how brilliant, God. I couldn't have come up with a better plan.

Despite all the affirmations, however, I remained uncomfortable with the position I occupied in the local Christian family. I indeed felt like a pioneer, like I did when I moved to this vast country from the tiny, crowded low countries. There was, however, a big difference between the adventuresome spirit that characterized that move and my mid-life need for stability and predictability. The pioneer in me was now at odds with the part in me that had a strong need to simply belong in one place, one "box," one church family. As a young adult, life was filled with making new choices and exploring new territory. Now in mid-life, I just wanted to slow down and simply continue on well-chosen paths. Nothing seemed further from reality. The road was to be created, not followed.

One of the hardest parts was to allow God's Spirit to redefine where, and to whom, I belonged in relationship to God, others, myself, the church. My formation in ministry and church leadership resulted in a changed relationship with both clergy and laity, making me belong to both groups and to neither at the same time. Moreover, I felt forced to shed the false security of thinking that the direction of my life even remotely "belonged" to me anyway.

I appreciated anew Jesus' words in response to one enthusiastic follower, "I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Luke 9:57-58). In some ways, I belonged everywhere and nowhere. I belonged in my Roman Catholic tradition, yet moved freely in other sanctuaries. I belonged with the laity, for that is what I was in my own tradition. Yet in some ways I also belonged with the clergy because of a formation that profoundly changed my self-identity, a change that our tradition calls an "indelible mark on the soul." Pioneers belong everywhere and nowhere; they belong to Life itself.

And so, unlike what I tried to tell my family and friends back in the Netherlands when I moved to Canada, the pioneering was not done. It never is. For a big part of pioneering is to be radically open to new possibilities, open to surprises, open to grace in unexpected places. It is about knowing that the horizon is merely an optical illusion, that there is a greater world, a wider vision, which beckons us always to step off the beaten track and to live life following in God's footprint, with *only* God's footprint to guide us.

Pioneering forging a way where there is no way, being the first to enter, to guide or to lead the way. Jesus was a pioneer in every respect, and asks us to follow. Funny, Jesus forged a way; each of us is to both follow that way and forge a way that is new in our own time and place.

“Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money – not even an extra tunic.” (Luke 9:3) “Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave.” (Matthew 10:11)