

SPIRITUS

SPECIAL ISSUE

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Meet Cheryl Palmer, New Incumbent of Christ Church Deer Park

On January 1, 2018, Christ Church Deer Park will welcome its new incumbent, Canon Cheryl Palmer. In advance of her arrival, Cheryl graciously sat down with the editor of SPIRITUS to share some information about herself so that parishioners would have a better understanding of what she is bringing to our parish. Thank you, Cheryl, and welcome!



Tell us about your religious upbringing.

What prompted you to enter the priesthood?

In Jamaica, where I was born and lived until age 17, church was a normal and important part of my life. The vast majority of my friends were from church, most of my extra-curricular activities were there. On Sundays, I was there twice—Eucharist in the morning, evensong later—and at age thirteen I started teaching Sunday School. My life was ordered and formed by the church, and my rector, who also taught me religion in high school, was a constant and caring presence in my life. In my early teens I declared that I wanted to work in the church. I was one of the first of twelve priestly vocations that came from my parish in Jamaica over a thirty-year period. So, there was no flash of light, but a deep and continuous development in faith and vocation.

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Some parishioners remember you fondly from your days as an honorary assistant at Christ Church Deer Park in the 90s when you asked a lot of “why” questions. How would you say you have changed and grown since then?

I am sure I have changed and grown in many ways since leaving Christ Church Deer Park over twenty years ago, but I have certainly not changed with respect to asking “why.” Maybe I can now frame the question so people do not feel defensive, but “why” is a critical question that ought always to be asked. “Why” gives us meaning and understanding, allows us to dig deeper, brings clarity, keeps us engaged, shows interest and concern... I hope I never stop asking “why.” And, of course, I enjoy being asked “why,” too.

So, why Christ Church Deer Park and why now?

After eighteen months of thinking about a return to parish ministry and looking seriously at two possibilities in the diocese that eventually did not work out, Bishop Kevin dropped the notion of

Christ Church Deer Park in my lap. Applying for the position never crossed my mind for even a moment. It was not that I ruled it out; it simply did not occur to me as a possibility until Bishop Kevin asked me, “What about Christ Church Deer Park?” I looked at him with something greater than astonishment. “Why would I do that?” I asked him. “It’s St. Clement’s one kilometre south, and I am sure they are not looking for a 60-year-old woman who wears flats! Places like Christ Church Deer Park are looking for a young person with amazing new church ideas that will gather in the masses.” He gave me that twinkling-eyes, sparkling-smile look and said, “I want you to think about it.” Three days later, I gave him permission to pass on my resume to the search committee. And that is where things got exciting.

Christ Church Deer Park had a wonderfully diligent and welcoming search committee. The members of the committee were determined to find the most suitable person for the position, and I was immediately caught up in that task. As Carolyn Kearns will tell you, the first interview was an important and essential “tire kicking” exercise. I went to the first interview because Bishop Kevin wanted me to go. I went to the second interview because I wanted to work with those seven, amazing search committee members. I said to myself, “If they represent the congregation, I want to work there!” At the completion of the second interview, I was filled with excitement of the real possibility of being appointed as the incumbent of Christ Church Deer Park. From unawareness to a keen desire. The Spirit was at work!

What kind of leadership can our parish expect from you? In what areas?

One of the stories of Jesus that I find wonderfully informative and affirming is from Luke 10. In it, Jesus commissions seventy (or seventy-two) disciples and sends them out on a mission in pairs. Two-by-two he sends them to be “labourers in God’s harvest.”

Working in teams is life-giving for me, and thus I would consider myself a collaborative leader who likes to recognize and nurture the talents in others, be they staff or lay leaders. In my experience, a team that is unified around a common vision/mission/goal is likely to be more productive than all the individuals working separately. Strong leaders surround themselves with a smart team of leaders.

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What do we need to know about you in order to work effectively with you as our incumbent at Christ Church Deer Park?

I am a straightforward speaker and, so, open communication is essential for our life together to be healthy. I will tell you what I am thinking—though it may not necessarily be what you want to hear—and I want others to tell me what they are thinking, as long as everyone speaks and acts with care and respect. I do not shy away from differences of opinion.

Please describe your liturgical style and practice? Do you sing?

As a long-time Anglican, I grew up in a broad church worship tradition. Until I moved to Canada in my late teens, I did not know of such entities as high and low churches, hence the broadness of my style and practice, which includes weekly Eucharists, morning and evening prayer, observance of all holy days, a keen understanding of the importance of word and sacrament, and the involvement of lay people (including youth and children) in liturgies.

I seek to be involved in liturgical experiences that are excellent, but not precious—fresh and engaging, rather than bland. Thus, I am keen about thoughtful liturgical innovation and am in no way dogmatic about liturgical styles and practices that are different from my own.

I love to sing, but right now I am still recovering from thyroid surgery (September 2017) in which my vocal cords were compromised. So, at the time of writing, my speaking voice is strained and my singing voice is non-existent. Speech therapy for the past several weeks has been helpful.

**What is your attitude towards technology?
Does it have a role to play in worship?**

I adore gadgets!! To the degree that technology is a tool that can aid us in our worship life and faith development and attract those beyond our doors, I am keen to use technological developments that are appropriate. However, I must admit that a worship service with a big screen at the front of the nave with words, music, and photos do not immediately appeal to me. But, then, worship is not about my likes and dislikes.

“For me, the most compelling aspect of our faith is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus...It is a life story with so many aspects to which we may relate.”

In 2016 when we participated in an initiative called Natural Church Development, our parish was found to be deficient in something called “Passionate Spirituality.” What does that term mean to you? How, if at all, do you think we should address the situation?

I cannot think of an Anglican Church that participated in Natural Church Development that was not found wanting in the stave known as Passionate Spirituality. We are not known for our exuberance. “Anglican” and “passionate” may in fact be opposite words! However, that particular initiative is coaxing us into another expression of our faith, what I would describe as a less reticent and more enthusiastic expression. We are being encouraged to come out of the faith closet and have open, fearless interactions with others about our spiritual lives. This requires practice—opportunities to discuss and share one’s faith (including doubts and fears) in a safe way within the community and opportunities to listen to those we may not agree with, without feeling threatened, defensive, or aggressive.

Some parishioners would say that to thrive and grow Christ Church Deer Park needs more “bums in the pews.” What do you say to that?

“Bums in pews” is not an end in itself. Increased numbers are great for any parish, but that is too

crude a way of discerning whether or not we are doing God’s work of building up the kingdom. At best, extra bodies might be a sign that the community and its worship are attracting people. But thriving and growing may be better measured by the engagement of the newcomers in the life and ministry of the parish. An even more important understanding of growth is the faith development of the community.

The parish selection committee asked how you might prepare our congregation for a discussion on the blessing or marriage of same sex unions, given that there are different opinions about the matter. How did you answer?

I told the search committee that I was exhausted with this subject. When I went to St. Clement’s over twenty years ago, there was much discussion at the parish level about homosexuality. Even at that time I thought: “This is an issue?” We have been talking non-stop for decades, and so one wonders what more talking will do. Civic society has already said “yes,” so our talks will not alter much, except lose homosexual Anglicans who do not feel welcomed. However, if Christ Church Deer Park truly desires to continue with this discussion, I would promote an educational series about same-sex blessing/marriage that would include panel discussions and speakers of varying opinions prior to any decision declaring the parish’s will to be a designated place for same-sex marriages.

On a personal note, what would you identify as the most compelling thing about Christianity?

Whole forests have been depleted in the exercise of answering this question! For me, the most compelling aspect of our faith is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. That narrative engrosses me at all times. It is a life story with so many aspects to which we may relate. I am compelled by people and story, not necessarily by ethical and theological concepts. Story allows both a five-year-old and an eighty-five-year-old to enter into the faith.

Do you have a favourite passage from the Bible or other quotation that inspires you? What appeals to you about it?

I have many favourite passages, but two often come to mind when I am asked this question: Ezekiel’s valley of dry bones (37:1-14) and Isaiah’s comforting words in 40:30-31. They both speak of triumph over death and decay and an everlasting hope in the goodness of God.

Apart from your employment and vocation in the church, what do you do for recreation and what kind of things interest you?

Walking is my most enjoyable (and time-consuming) recreational activity. I make an effort to walk 10–12 kilometres each day, even in the winter.

I can usually be seen on the Belt Line or in Mount Pleasant Cemetery. Other favourite spots are the Lower Don Trail and the Boardwalk. This past spring, I walked 200 kilometres of the Camino in Spain. It was arduous and wonderful!

Reading fiction and some non-fiction (just started Bill Bryson’s *A Short History of Nearly Everything*). Watching movies (most recently saw and loved *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*). Travelling outside Canada (most recently to Spain), experiencing different cultures and history and suspending day-to-day life for a few days/weeks.

Please tell us something that most people wouldn’t know or understand about you. Why wouldn’t that be apparent to others?

Twelve and a half years ago my brother died after a brief bout of cancer, leaving his wife and two very young children (three-years and seven-weeks-old). The pain of that loss has never gone away, though it has abated over time. It is not apparent because, in spite of that sadness, I live my life with joy and hope. Death does not have the final word.



As you begin your ministry with us, what will you be listening for?

I will be listening for members’ hopes, hurts, joys, concerns, and passions. I will be listening to discern members’ gifts, talents, and needs.

Is there anything we haven’t asked you that you wish we’d asked?

I am married to Danylo Dzwonyk, who is of Ukrainian descent and grew up in Kenora, Ontario. He has a degree in theology and was a seminarian with a religious order in the Ukrainian Catholic Church, but he did not pursue ordination. After having held the position as Registrar at Massey College, Danylo is on long-term leave as he recovers from depression. We have been married for twenty-three years and have no children.

Giving Thanks

It has been almost two years since the Syrian refugee family that we sponsored arrived in Toronto. On Sunday, December 17, 2017, in celebration of their successful settlement and integration, we hosted a party after the 10:00 am service. Suheila Alkadiri presented a beautiful piece of art to the church, featuring the Ninety-nine Beautiful Names of Allah.*

* See <https://99namesofallah.name>

Members of the parish refugee committee pose with Suheila (mother), Maysam (daughter) and Ammar (son). Missing from the photo are Abdulsattar (father) and Moaz (son).