

Drawing the Circle Wide Interview Series
An Interview with St. Stephen's Parishioner HUGH BAKER
June 5, 2025

Laura Locke

We're excited to launch our Parishioner Interviews project at St. Stephen's. Thank you, Hugh, for agreeing to be take part in our first interview! Perhaps we could begin by having you tell us a bit about your early years. Where were you born, Hugh?

Hugh Baker

Thanks, Laura - I'm happy to help launch this project. I was born in Edmonton, but I was raised in Calgary. We moved to Calgary when I was a young baby, and I grew up in Rideau, close to Elbow Drive on the river. A nice area, and close to Christ Church Anglican, in Elbow Park. But we didn't go there very often; just once in a while.

Reza Dehaki

Can you tell us a little about your family? Did you have any siblings?

Hugh

Yes, I have two older brothers and one younger sister. My father was born in Edmonton, and my mother was born in Sylvan Lake. My father was a geologist - he worked for Amoco. My mother was busy raising us children, and then she went back to university and became an artist. She passed away about 10 years ago.

Laura

I grew up in Red Deer, so I'm very familiar with Sylvan Lake. Hugh, are there any special memories from your early years that stand out?

Hugh

Well, when I was growing up, my parents sent me to St. John's Boys School, just outside of Edmonton. It was kind of an Anglican-based school which had a very arduous outdoor program. We would go snowshoeing - 25 miles in a day - and dog sledding. One time we canoed from Edmonton to Winnipeg, which took 32 days. We also did the Grand Portage from Thunder Bay to Winnipeg. So those are special memories, and real challenges for me as a young boy. I also enjoyed my early years of living on the river by our house in Calgary. That was really special.

Unfortunately, one memory that's not so happy was when my father died by suicide when I was 14. I was very close to the situation when that happened, and it was reflected on the rest of my life. It changed things for me, and I started to seek out more meaning in life.

Laura

Such a tragedy when you were so young. I'm sorry to hear that.

Hugh

I've had to work through it, but it's something that you grow from, and you learn from.

Laura

What values do you feel that you've carried with you from your early years?

Hugh

I think the values I learned were honesty, trust, respect for elders, and respect for other people as well. I'd also say I learned to be resilient. I was a seeker, always seeking after things that were important to me and in my spirituality as a Christian. Also, I became a world traveler. I traveled a lot. When I was seventeen, I graduated from high school and left home, and I started traveling and living overseas for quite a while.

Laura

That must have been quite an experience, I'm sure.

Hugh

Yes, it was. I didn't do the Europe trip that most people who were my age did. I travelled through Asia, which was exciting, and then I joined a caravan trip from Kathmandu to London. We traveled through Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, Iran, and Turkey. We were in Iran for about two weeks – such a beautiful country. That was in 1978, I believe; just before the Shah of Iran was deposed.

Reza

Yes, one year before the revolution.

Laura

Can you tell us about your work life, Hugh? Perhaps about your education and your professional life?

Hugh

It was kind of blended in with my spirituality and where I was living. I ended up in Jerusalem, and that's where I became a Christian. I decided to start my university studies there at Hebrew University. I had to learn Hebrew first, which wasn't easy. And then my major at university was Mandarin Chinese and International relations. Mao Zedong had just died, and Deng Xiaoping had come to power. I looked to the future, and I thought that China was going to be the future – and so it would be good to have that language and expertise. I spent two years in China, and then went overseas doing missionary work in Africa, and then also in Hong Kong, China and South Korea. During this time, I was attending a Pentecostal Church. I was beginning to feel that the church I had been attending had a bit of a cult aspect to it – there was too much control. I left the church at that time and returned to Canada. I finished my studies at UBC in Vancouver and majored in Chinese.

Laura

That is so interesting! How about your work life after that?

Hugh

I was able to represent some Canadian companies in mainland China, using my Mandarin and through a CIDA project. Then I came back to Canada, and after a few years decided to go back to Asia and teach English in Japan. I taught English in Japan for about three years, and then I traveled across the Silk Road into China to Pakistan and India and had another long journey by myself.

Laura

Wow – so many rich experiences, which I'm sure have really impacted your life. Hugh, what are you currently doing in your professional life?

Hugh

Right now, I'm working for the Canadian Mental Health Association, and it's very interesting. When I had an interview for the position, they asked me about my career going forward, but I've never felt that the work that I do with the Canadian Mental Health Association is a "career". It's about helping people with their mental health and addictions. I've always felt it to be an important service for people, and for me it's like a mission, and a way of giving back to society. I have a lived experience with mental health myself, so I really believe in peer support because I know it works. So, on that basis, we facilitate classes in peer support and help people that are struggling with their mental health and addiction issues.

Laura

Wow, that's so interesting, Hugh. Has there been someone in your life who was really significant; perhaps someone who was a model for you, or perhaps led the way down a certain path?

Hugh

Yes. There was an older lady who was our neighbour in Calgary when I was growing up. She was a Pentecostal woman who was quite eccentric, and, as I mentioned, we were Anglicans. My mother told me that I shouldn't ever talk to her. And one day I was walking home from high school, and I kind of heard a voice in my head saying, "Buy some groceries for Mrs. Hart and take them over to her." And so I stopped at the Safeway on Elbow Drive and 4th Street, and I bought a big bag of groceries. I remember ringing her doorbell, and she didn't answer. But the door was unlocked, so I opened up the door and she was laying on the floor. It turned out she had been there for a number of days, and she couldn't get up. All she could do was to pray to God to send somebody that could help her. So I helped her up onto a chair and gave her something to drink and eat, and she said to me, "You're my guardian angel." That experience kind of followed me through my life, and helped shape my spiritual life.

Reza

Do you think your views on certain aspects of faith have evolved over time, as your life experiences and circumstances have changed?

Hugh

Yes, my faith *has* changed over the years. I really enjoyed the Pentecostal way of worship and music and dance, but then I became much more contemplative, seeking out a deeper spiritual life. And I've had so many wonderful spiritual experiences. I went on another pilgrimage to Tibet, and I was fortunate

enough to receive a blessing from His Holiness, the Dalai Lama. That experience was remarkable. I was in a crowd of people as he passed by. Everybody was looking down as he was passing by and blessing them. But I decided to look up, right when he was passing, and our eyes met. I was so surprised by his reaction – he started to giggle! I was delighted. I also spent some time studying Buddhism and meditation in Nepal and in Thailand. But I always know that God is there, with me, and I really try to go deep into that spiritual life as much as I can.

Reza

So many wonderful experiences! Is there a passage of Scripture or a religious practice that feels special or meaningful or inspiring for you?

Hugh

Well, from a Scriptural point of view, yes – there is a phrase, “Go ye up to Jerusalem.” And when I first arrived in Israel, I ran into some pilgrims that were on a pilgrimage from Australia, and I joined them in their pilgrimage. Then after they left, I went down to the Sinai Peninsula, and I stayed there for about three weeks in a palm frond hut. One morning I heard a voice again, saying, “Go ye up to Jerusalem.” And it was so odd, so unusual, and that was when I decided that I wanted to become a Christian ... but I didn't really know what becoming a Christian meant! I thought it must mean joining a church. And so I thought I would go around and see all the different churches in Jerusalem to find one that might be the best for me, and that's how I found Mount Zion Fellowship. I would also say that the Eucharist is probably the most significant part of the religious services in the Anglican Church where I celebrate. I find that that is very important to me.

Reza

Can you talk a little about living out your Christian faith with people who are close to you, or your extended family or neighbours? What are the challenges in that?

Hugh

Well, I believe that the work I do is my faith in action. It's working with people who are vulnerable in our society, the homeless, those that are living with mental health issues and addictions. I have experience with living with HIV and mental health issues myself. I've been living with HIV and AIDS since 1986 and that's really what brought me to Saint Stephen's. I was seeking out a place where I could feel accepted, where I could express my faith, and find healing. And I definitely have felt a lot of healing at St. Stephen's.

Reza

Can you talk about how you ended up at Saint Stephen's?

Hugh

Well, back in the day, we used to have the Chapel open for prayer. I lived in the neighbourhood, and I used to walk by the church, and one day I thought, “I'll just slip in there and pray.” And I found that the silence, the time of contemplation, and the church itself, was all so beautiful and so enriching. Then a few of us gay men who were Anglican Christians got together, and we formed a group out of St. Stephen's called Integrity, which is an organization known in North America for Gay and Lesbian

Christians. We also found a lot of healing and acceptance at St Stephen. The non-judgmental and welcoming atmosphere of Saint Stephen's really took me there, and kept me there.

Reza

That's a wonderful reflection on St. Stephen's, to be able to say that. What keeps you at St. Stephen's?

Hugh

I feel a sense of peace and love at St. Stephen's. I help as a Greeter, and I do pastoral care out of St. Stephen's. And I feel that Rev. Nicole is really opening her heart to the congregation. You can feel that love emanating from her, and also emanating from the people in the congregation. No one is judgmental – just very accepting, and so that's what keeps me there. And I look forward to the future.

Laura

Thank you so much, Hugh, for taking the time to talk with us today. We look forward to sharing your wonderful stories with our fellow parishioners!