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Ottawa*Watch* 198: A mayoralty and some civility

By Lloyd Mackey

Sharon Gaetz served a decade as Chilliwack's mayor. And, indeed, by the time she left office, the community's population had reached the 100,000 mark.

It was like a blast from the past.

Part of my work, this week, has been to check out some of the civic elections in British Columbia, which took place last Saturday, November 15. The idea was to do what I do in Ottawa – find stories illustrating the faith-political interface.

One good place to check was Chilliwack, my old stamping grounds, where I was editor of *The Chilliwack Progress*, back in the 70s.

At that time, unbeknownst to me, four young people were graduating from high school in Chilliwack. And not too many months later, they were marrying their childhood sweethearts.

One couple was Chuck and Debbie Strahl. Today, Chuck is minister of Indian and northern affairs in the Stephen Harper government.

The other was Jim and Sharon Gaetz. On Friday, Sharon was elected mayor of Chilliwack – by a landslide, I should point out.

So, on Monday, I picked up the phone and called her soon-to-be worship. Amazingly, she remembered my name, even though it has been almost three decades since Edna and I embarked on a pilgrimage which took us to Vancouver and eventually to Ottawa.

Not long after their marriage, Sharon and Jim joined the pastoral staff of Glad Tidings Church, a few blocks east of Chilliwack's downtown core. Then, they set out to plant a new "spinoff" congregation, known today as Southside Church. It only a minor leap of logic to note that church is located on the south side of the freeway, in what has long been informally known as Sardis. Under the Gaetz leadership, Southside has grown to a congregation of 800 – many of them first generation Christians.

Both Jim and Sharon are ordained ministers and their parishioners have grown quite used to seeing them preach together on a Sunday morning, perched on two stools. Sharon liked to joke that Jim is the straight man and she provides the colour. In addition, he handled the church budget stuff and she, the worship aspects.

They retired from their joint pastoral responsibilities in the past year. One reason, Sharon recalls, was the recognition that often, church leaders reach most effectively those age

levels 10 years above and below them. Now that they are into their 50s, having led the church for 15 years, they recognized that Southside could benefit from younger leadership.

But there was another factor, as well. Twelve years before, Sharon had accepted the challenge to run for a Chilliwack city councillor spot, after serving as a school trustee since 1987. She has topped the council polls three times.

Now, with some of the more experienced council members retiring, it seemed to make sense that she should throw her hat into the mayoralty ring. That meant clearing the decks, so, if the task fell to her, she would have the time and energy to handle it.

Sharon grew up in Chilliwack, in a household of seven children. They lived in various parts of the community, from Yarrow in the southwest to Fairfield Island, just a few blocks from the Fraser River.

She and Jim had two children. The oldest, Jothan, 27, and his wife, Joann, have given them two grandchildren. They live in the Philippines, where they work with Youth with a Mission (YWAM). Their daughter, Jenna, died at age 22, in a motor scooter accident. They miss her.

Prior to ordination, Sharon and Jim both took Bible college education. Then, in the run up to her political involvement, she took some political science courses at Columbia Bible College taught by John Redekop. Before retirement, Redekop had been head of the political science department at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario. Since returning to BC, he served a stint on the Abbotsford City Council and taught at both Trinity Western University and Columbia.

So Sharon believed that she had, as a teacher, someone who was well versed both in the world of politics and the means by which a Christian can serve well in that sphere.

Asked how she has adapted to the criticism of “Bible thumpers” in politics, she replies that she understands the fears – given “sleazy televangelists who say one thing and do another.”

But she hopes she can continue “to be true to myself and to my faith. I can’t just put those values aside, but am not known, either, for shoving religion down people’s throats. I hope people see the way I live.”

A number of issues live in tension in Chilliwack – downtown redevelopment, the accommodating of a growing population with the continuing viability of 900 farms, and the realigning of the former Canadian Forces Base into a major university centre.

When Sharon was first married, Chilliwack had a population of around 35,000. Today, it is close to 80,000. It could be that by the time she finishes “mayoring”, the 100,000th person will have been born or will have moved in.

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Sharon and I also talked about civility in politics and the way in which congenial and open faith can contribute to that process.

Co-incidentally, this morning, civility was the watchword on the federal political level. It has been emphasized by the political leaders, along with the argument that people of competing political philosophies need to get along if the presently difficult economy is to be well-managed.

And, by the time you read this, there will be a new Speaker for the House of Commons. Whoever it turns out to be, he (because there are only male candidates) will be expected to hold order in what has become, at times, an arguably unruly chamber.

But more about that next week.

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