

people redecorate their offices — I repair the radiator."

REV. FRANK MEADOWS, pastor of First-St. Andrew's United Church in London, waves his hand to indicate one end of a spectrum. "There are ministers for whom writing a letter makes a busy day." He sweeps his hand to the opposite end. "And then there's Susan."

Susan Eagle — formally and properly the Reverend Susan Eagle — is a fifth-generation minister but the first woman in her family to be ordained. The 37 year old has caught London's attention as an articulate and passionate advocate for the poor and struggling among us.

March against poverty? Eagle was there, trekking the route from Windsor to Toronto. Cheyenne apartment problems? Eagle has been fighting for five years to improve conditions at the neglected units, a battle the municipal government has finally joined. Hurricane relief to South Carolina? In February, Eagle organized two van loads of ELUCO women, teens and children to travel to Eutawville, S.C., a village where many of those suffering were poor women and their children. The Thomson report on social assistance reform? Eagle was the provincial United Church representative on ISARC — the Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition — that advised the Thomson committee. International poverty issues? Eagle has been the United Church representative on the World Council of Church's church and society committee for six years.

She is the recipient both of the YWCA Peace Award and the Mary Campbell Award for community service, presented by Information London. But public recognition, while it furthers awareness of poverty issues, gives Eagle a pedestal she'd rather not mount.

"My social services work becomes far more visible," she says, pointing out correctly that she wouldn't be the subject of a magazine profile if she was full-time pastor at the Kilworth and Delaware churches, rather than dividing her time between that traditional congregational ministry and the east-end project she shares with community worker Rose Lemmer.

Still, Eagle is willing to be a public crusader "because I was hired to be a liaison between the church and the low-income community. As part of that, I accept invitations to speak and educate." She speaks on behalf of low-income women and men because they often "can't afford, either in time or in the expenses, to educate middle-income people about their lives."

EAGLE DRAWS HER PASSION for social justice from a deep well. Her father, the late Rev. Glen Eagle, served as a United Church minister in London Conference for many years before moving to Toronto. He believed in the centrality of social justice issues to Christian faith, says Joyce Eagle, Glen's wife, Susan's mother and herself a minister's daughter.

"From the time she was very young, Susan was always concerned with those not getting a fair deal," Joyce recalls.

Living out Jesus's call to feed the hungry and minister to the downtrodden didn't mean living a family life of sober, stolid do-gooding for the Eagles. "My husband had a terrific sense of humor and there was great joy in whatever we did," Joyce says. "We didn't give the children the feeling they were bound by protocol."

Glen, Susan's younger brother, is now a United Church minister in Toronto. Her older sister, Lynn,

Joyce says, all received hands-on introduction to the hard edges of ministry while working as camp counsellors at a summer farm camp their father set up on the family farm near Creemore.

"My husband's feeling was that a lot kids in the city who were in trouble would be helped if they had a chance to be in the country," Joyce says. The campers, housed in converted rail cars renovated by church members, were usually tough, hurting children and challenged the Eagle teens' limits of ministering love. "Our teens would say, okay, let's get some campfire wood! And one of the kids said, get your own f---in' firewood. It was quite the eye-opener."

Joyce says Susan's entry into ordained ministry was "very much her own idea." Susan agrees. After completing an honors degree in history at University of Toronto, Susan enrolled in theology at Emmanuel College, "to search for personal answers for my personal faith." Three events in 1974 convinced her she had "a sense of a call, a possibility of ministry, for me."

She discovered the writings of Third World liberation theology and enrolled in a course sponsored by the Canadian Urban Training for Christian Service. At the same time, as president of the student council at her college, she became embroiled in what certainly hasn't been her last fight over affordable housing.

"We found out the university planned an expansion that would mean a group of seniors would lose their housing," she says. The students protested and the seniors' housing was saved long enough for the residents to find alternate accommodations.

For Eagle, such campaigns are the lifeblood of Christian faith. "I can't think of any way you can be a Christian and not be political. We must strive for justice, the love of life and equality as reflections of the inclusiveness of the love of God."

Eagle isn't comfortable with the image of ministry as a set-apart leader on high, an image she labels "the old stereotype of male ministry." Clergy, in Eagle's vision, "are called to a certain kind of lifestyle, but I believe lay people are called to the same lifestyle. We struggle together in the priesthood of all believers."

She supports the United Church's stand of allowing all members, regardless of sexual orientation, to be considered for ordained ministry. Her position hasn't endeared her to conservatives in the church.

"When it comes to concerns for the poor and need for social action, we're not at loggerheads," says Rev. Morley Clarke, a retired minister active in the conservative reform group Community of Concern. "But on the homosexual ordination issue, we're in quite different camps. Eagle, as does the national church administration, sees the question as a justice issue. I see it as a moral issue." Nevertheless, he generously praises Eagle's ministry in her years in London. "She does her homework, is articulate, and deeply concerned about poor people and oppressed people here in London and throughout the world."

AFTER HER ORDINATION IN 1977, Eagle was posted for two years to a Cape Breton pastoral charge, where she became part of the community outreach addressing the chronic unemployment woes in the region. In 1979, she rejoined her mother, brother, sister-in-law and six others to form a summer Christian travelling theatre troupe called Prodigal Players before accepting a call to the three-congregation Straffordville pastoral charge southwest of Tillsonburg in London Conference, where she spent five years before moving to her present, two-pronged ministry in London.

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