

Musical talent makes Minister unique



By Mary Cook

Jim Baldwin, minister at Britannia United Church in Ottawa, took many twists and turns before he donned the ministerial robes, which, by the way, he seldom wears in the pulpit, preferring instead to be comfortable and in more casual clothes. And that suits his parishioners just fine.

His casual dress and his informal stance, usually with his guitar in hand, have made him one of the most popular ministers in the area.

It's nothing short of a miracle that Jim ended up as a minister. He was born with a profound speech impediment, "I was born tongue-tied," is how he puts it, and at a very young age, to compound his problems, he was gradually losing his hearing.

His parents were told he would need tubes in his ears to correct his loss, and he was booked for surgery on a Monday. However, his grandparents were at a revival meeting over the weekend, and prayers were offered for Jim. When he appeared for his surgery on the Monday, the doctor could find no evidence of a hearing loss! Everyone, including the doctor, was astounded, and called it a miracle. Today, Jim's hearing is fine, but when he gets tired he finds his old speech impediment creeps into his delivery. "But I am very blessed...it's very minor, and I am probably the only one who notices it," he says.

For many years, Jim and his family had drifted away from the church. "Then a woman came to our house, and was able to talk us into going back. So we attended City View United. I was sixteen at the time, and oddly enough, I always wanted to go back." Jim was soon involved with the youth group and the choir, but when a minister suggested he might consider the ministry, Jim was shocked. "It was the farthest thing from my mind. I said I wanted to study English and Drama. When I was told both could be part of the ministry, I still wasn't convinced. But I became more and more involved in the church and lived for the Thursday-to-Sunday activities. It was very odd, but more and more I found that everything I did pointed to the ministry."

But getting an education had to come first, so Jim enrolled at Carleton and came out with a Bachelor of Psychology degree.

By this time Jim Baldwin was convinced the ministry was for him. “I never doubted the call, but I did doubt my ability to answer the call, and I hesitated a whole year before finally making the decision. Needless to say, my mother was delighted.”

Marriage to his wife Val, and a first year in Ottawa at Ottawa University and then to Queen’s cemented his calling. He worked as a trained Lay Supply and was ordained in 1986.

But this just isn’t a story of a bright young man who floundered in his faith and then miraculously became a minister. This is the story of a young man who brings a whole different approach to the ministry, often using his guitar as a prop. And it’s the story of young man who has brought boundless joy to many, many people through his rare talent as a musician.

Jim came from a musical background. As a child he loved to sing. His first recording was taped when he was only four years old. “I sang ‘on Top of Spaghetti all covered with cheese’ while Mother put it on tape and that was the beginning.”

While he was out West, he won in the Kiwanis Music Festival, and back in Ottawa took classical voice lessons for two years. All the time he was mastering the guitar. He was the first adult vocal winner on the popular Home Grown Café on CJOH. Today, Jim is a familiar figure with local community groups including the Orpheus Society.

Jim’s musical talents are very much a part of his ministry. There is no church choir, but there are special musical offerings at each church service, and Jim, if he sings, it’s because its part of the message he is giving.

His gifts of guitar playing and his marvelous singing voice are great ways to reach the children in his congregation. “What I do now is all about balance. I feel it’s most important today to be relevant to the day, while still honouring the past and our traditions.” It works for Britannia United. One member says of Jim, “he has brought joy to us through his wonderful musical talents, and he has this way of bringing music into his messages. I never leave church without a feeling of real happiness.”

That's what makes Jim Baldwin unique. He serves his congregation well, and his congregation loves him and he loves them. He is available at the beck and call of the wider community, he shares his talents with countless others beyond his own church, and he accepts that times change, and although he holds to the old traditions, he adapts his ministry to the relevancy of the times. And that's what makes the Rev. Jim Baldwin unique.

This article originally appeared in the January 2010 issue of Forever Young Newspaper.