



With Archbishop Melissa at the 2016 Pride Parade. PHOTOS Courtesy of Eric Stroo & Diocese of New Westminster Communications



Bishop Alawas leads the men including Deacon Stroo playing gongs and dancing on March 6, 2016 at St. Barnabas, Alba in the Philippines.



As clergy of St. Michael's, Eric signs the Covenant in Ministry with Mission to Seafarers on September 9, 2018.



Clearing the snow at St. Helen's Episcopal Visitation.

The Integration of Two Vocations

An Interview with the Reverend Eric Stroo

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As the episcopacy of the Most Rev. Melissa Skelton, 9th Bishop of the diocese of New Westminster and 12th Metropolitan of the Ecclesiastical Province of BC/Yukon, draws to a conclusion, the spotlight will likely shift to the newly elected Coadjutor Bishop-elect, the Rev. John Stephens, elected October 3, 2020. As exciting as this new chapter is, Archbishop Melissa will continue her active leadership of, and engagement with her flocks right up until her official retirement date of February 28, 2021. So, to continue the "spotlight" metaphor, the light may dim a bit, but it will still shine around and from the Archbishop. There is another who is included in that light (and I'm not referring to Teddy, Archbishop Skelton's ubiquitous West Highland Terrier) and that is her partner, Deacon, the Rev. Eric Stroo.

After dating for a couple of years, Melissa and Eric were married in Cannon Beach, Oregon, August 15, 2015. Eric is a mental health counsellor in Seattle. He is also an ordained deacon, licensed in the Episcopal Diocese of Olympia but on loan to the diocese of New Westminster. In early 2017, Rev. Stroo was appointed Deacon at the Parish of St. Michael, Vancouver, aka St. Michael's Multicultural Anglican Church. His principal areas of ministry were to be Deacon of the Word and Table (preaching occasionally) on those Sundays when he was present in Vancouver (two to three Sundays per month) and providing assistance to the Senior Port Chaplain for the Mission to Seafarers (MtS). The St. Michael's community had decided that MtS become a priority of the parish, a commitment that was solidified by a Covenant in Ministry signed September 9, 2018. Rev. Stroo also accompanied his spouse on her two visits to the diocese of New Westminster's Companion Diocese, Episcopal Diocese of Northern Philippines in March of 2016 and in February of 2019.

As many are aware, Eric and Melissa have maintained two households, in Seattle and in Vancouver. As they are

both very involved with their vocations, they have continued their ministries but have faced extended periods of separation, which for married people (not to mention newlyweds) can be very difficult. The COVID-19 pandemic and the closure of the US/Canada border to all but essential travel has made their separations longer and their visits more difficult to arrange. Needless to say, Eric has not been able to participate in-person as deacon at St. Michael's; he has, however, been a regular participant in their online Sunday worship.

With a few months left in Archbishop Skelton's incumbency a number of people (principal among them has been *Topic* contributor, playwright, author, journalist and Christ Church Cathedral parishioner, Ann Fletcher), have expressed an interest in hearing from the less "heard-from" half of the Skelton/Stroo couple. Many thanks to Eric for taking the time to answer some questions and share his take on life as a deacon of the church, a therapist, and husband of a bishop.

Q. So, if I'd met you 20 years ago, and told you that you seem like the kind of person that would marry a bishop, what would you have said?

A. Well, Randy, given that I did not know of any female bishops in the year 2000, I guess I would have been confused. Flattered, naturally, but confused. Apart from that, I think I would have considered myself too much of a homebody to imagine being married to a bishop. But then again, 20 years ago, I *was* newly divorced and hoping to remarry at some point; I was to marry a woman with initiative. And with a generous capacity to appreciate a chipped vessel. Little did I know...

Q. Please share a little bit of your history: origins, education, background, etc.?

A. What to say? I'm a boomer, the second of four children

born in New York in the 1950s to a Dutch immigrant and an American woman. In my growing up years we lived in Virginia and then, when my parents found Southern attitudes somewhat stifling, we moved to Ohio. There I graduated from high school and attended Kenyon College. Formerly the site of an Episcopal seminary, Kenyon was a happy choice for me, with its religious heritage still reverberating. I was anything but a regular churchgoer in my college years, but my roommate, who has become a cherished, lifelong friend, will retire in January after 38 years as an Episcopal priest.

After college, I was restless and unfocused, and I traveled for a time, to include a year in the Netherlands, helped by Dutch family connections. I finally relaunched in Texas, working with emotionally disturbed adolescents and becoming drawn to the activism surrounding American intervention in Central America. I married, we started a family, and in 1987, moved to Washington so that I could start work for Microsoft Press.

My then-wife and I divorced in 2000, the year I left Microsoft. I am immensely proud to have a daughter and a son, now in their 30s and leading full lives in Oregon and Washington.

Altogether I have piled up a couple of master's degrees on my way to my current "dual vocation" as pastoral counselor and deacon. I am interested in much, but the deep channel for me has always been humanity: literature and faith and psychology.

Q. How and when did you come to faith?

A. I came to faith in stages, probably nothing unusual in that. As a child, I was brought to an Episcopal Church as a family activity, but our attendance was not, shall we say, scrupulous. For a period of time, I also spent Friday night once a month with my grandmother, a Roman Catholic



Delivering Christmas presents to the Seafarers in Vancouver Harbour, December 23, 2017.



Following Senior Port Chaplain the Rev. Peter Smyth down a gangway.



Surrey during an Advent



Father's Day at St. Mikes with Teofilo Bosaing.



Smyth , Toyken and Stroo at St. Mike's 130th Anniversary.



Archbishop and Deacon at a St. Michael's Christmas Party.

widow, who fascinated me with her rosary and her pencil drawings of Jesus (and pink and yellow coconut-filled candy).

In high school the two priests at St. John's, Worthington, Ohio, challenged me to see life in a faith community as compatible with seriousness, love, and laughter. Plus, the rector had teenage daughters. I was, however, still approaching religious faith with a focus primarily on trying to BE GOOD and behave strictly in keeping with God's will. Not really life-giving enough, I came to find.

As a married man with two small children, I returned to church attendance and found it meaningful, even stirring. I became immersed in the life of a small parish — teaching children, reading lessons, serving in leadership. That led over time to a lengthy discernment process that eventually saw me enrolled in the pastoral counseling program at Seattle University and simultaneously in diaconal formation in the diocese of Olympia. This phase was propelled by a new grounding of faith, to find God inwardly as much as outwardly, to focus less on right behavior and more on an identity that arises from the gift of divine presence. That has informed and blessed my faith adventure ever since.

Q. Could you share a little bit of your experiences at Microsoft? What was that like? How did it end?

A. I was an employee at Microsoft for 13 dynamic years. I had worked a couple of years in Texas as a technical writer, but Microsoft Press was like nothing I had ever experienced before. Much as I did in my university years, I found myself in the company of smart and intensely motivated people. The company culture was not simply about being competitive in the market, it was about owning the market. "A computer on every desk running Microsoft software." That was our mission statement. Emphasis on *every*.

Growth was feverish. New buildings being constructed

on the campus constantly, then new campuses sprouting up around the region, and every couple of years, our division would be shuffled to different quarters. Change was the byword as the industry hurtled forward, and the company transformed and reorganized frequently in its efforts to remain in the vanguard. We all felt the pressure to some degree, even in our book publishing division, though it was hardly the tip of the arrow. When the Internet exploded, the company found itself on the back foot; in addition, our efforts to dominate the industry had met with resentment. We were unpopular.

In the end (early 2000), I felt discouraged — less satisfied with my role, not well aligned with the character the company had assumed and struggling with "the work-life balance." Coincidentally, I left just as the "dot com bubble" was bursting.

Q. How did you pursue diaconal formation?

A. I had become very involved in lay ministry, so I needed quite a change of heart to believe that a different vocation would be right for me. After all, as part of the laity I could continue to be off-and-on skeptical and cynical about the ordained leaders! Harder to do if I became one of them. For years, I vacillated.

Then it happened. On a mission trip to Vietnam in 2006, with classmates and faculty from Seattle University, we entered a convent in the city of Hue. Among the sisters, I saw a demonstration of how the church could be a vital gift to a community in need. From a place of faith and sacrifice, they offered much-needed educational and medical resources to the surrounding villages. And they did it from a place of lifelong commitment. Their enterprise, if I can call it that, represented a large, life-enhancing church that I felt compelled to give my small self to.

From there, I stepped into the slow-moving stream

of official discernment and formation, emerging three or four years later to be ordained at the diocesan convention in Tacoma in 2013. One of my presenters for ordination was my friend, the Rev. Melissa Skelton.

Q. Do you agree that there is something inherently Anglican about a deacon being married to a bishop? (It is an ironic level of synchronicity)

A. It is a built-in kinship, if I follow your meaning. What strikes me is that the two of us are at home in the Anglican identity; it truly fits for us. And we have found it to be a healthy and unifying identity, one that has already enabled us to do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.

Q. Seven years ago, how knowledgeable were you about Canada and the Canadian Church? What do you know now that you didn't know then?

A. Hard to admit that I knew so little seven years ago. I had crossed the border two or three times, to Vancouver and Victoria, fascinated that a foreign country could be such a short drive away. But I had only gotten as far as the "showroom," visiting Stanley Park, the Museum of Anthropology, Butchart Gardens, and the like. I had a few Canadian colleagues, skilled couples' therapists from Vancouver, and I had come north for a two-day workshop at their invitation. My main impression was that it felt more "European" than the States, more aware of its place in the world (rather than largely oblivious to its place in the wider world, ala USA).

I could add that I sometimes think I have an affinity for Canada and Canadians. I grew up in the shadow of an older brother. He got more attention, did everything first, was more rebellious. I admired him, and at the same time I was glad that my path was not his. I chose to become more

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On board with a crew during a ship visit.



Ship visit with crew selfie.

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deeply familiar with our heritage from the Netherlands. They produce some fine skaters, by the way.

Q. In one sentence can you summarize the differences between the Episcopal Church (TEC) and the Anglican Church of Canada (ACoC)?

A. Pretty difficult. I suppose my attempt to do that would be to observe that ACoC seems more synonymous with the country, extending as it has to all its frontiers. And somehow its issues and concerns have taken on that identity, as a legacy and a duty. TEC has been an important church to the US, but one of many, not synonymous with the nation. It ventures into the national issues but has not been so closely identified with the nation itself. And one almost never hears in Episcopal worship an acknowledgment of gathering on unceded ancestral territory.

Q. How do you connect your call to ordained ministry to your vocation as a couples and family therapist?

A. It's a sensitive topic, and I am glad to try to answer it because it goes to the very heart of my life's work. The reality

that I have been living into is meant to reflect a connection, yes, or better yet the integration of the two vocations. My experience is that they inform each other: my faith fuels and informs my approach to healthy ("securely attached") relationships, and my clinical insights into relational growth and security inform the meanings I understand in scripture.

Of course, my goal is always to listen to the people I counsel and to enter into their world view, their values, their wounds, their cosmology. To see where light shines into it, what doors they have tried or might be willing to try. A first principle of therapy is to meet people where they are. So, I try to refrain from introducing religious language unless the client finds it congruent for them.

One of the creative challenges and satisfactions of diaconal ministry is to embody God's reconciling love in new environments and contexts. Maybe that involves welcoming seafarers into a port city, possibly helping them spend time ashore in safe, restorative ways. Maybe it is meeting a couple who have become sullenly adversarial and to amplify with them the underlying experience of joy and unity that

led them to one another.

Q. Is there a passage (or are there passages) from Scripture that inform and guide you in your ministry and vocation?

A. There are many, of course. The parable of the Good Samaritan comes immediately to mind, because first aid comes from the unlikely one, and because he does not believe he must act alone but takes the injured man to an inn where others can take over. We can give our part but not feel obliged to do it all. And then there is Job's story, which contains so much. But for me there is an essential recognition of what upends so many of my patients in their faith: the despair or outrage that a life of obedience can nevertheless meet with tragedy. It's humbling to be crushed by one crisis or another, and then to grope one's way back to a faith that transcends one's expectation of personal reward.

Q. What has been the greatest challenge in the past six and half years?

A. That's easy. The greatest challenge has been the last eight months, ever since the pandemic made border crossing difficult or impossible. I just thought it was a hardship when I had to drive up and back three times a month. Fortunately for me, I had six years to adjust my expectations to the separations—because I was not especially good at them in the beginning. Long before COVID-19, we had gotten comfortable making do with the virtual ways of staying connected, so that has surely helped. But I have missed my work with the admirable Sr. Port Chaplain Peter Smyth and the Mission to Seafarers, and I have felt a great emptiness without the dimension of in-person worship with the wonderful multi-cultural, multi-generational community of St. Michael's.

Q. What does the future hold for the Rev. Eric Stroo?

A. I am eager to find out. My counseling vocation still has a lot to teach me, and I find satisfaction in what I am able to bring to it still. And I am intent on rejoining diaconal service in the diocese of Olympia. Of course, I have loved the opportunities that have come to me in conjunction with Melissa's work—traveling to the Philippines, for example, was the gift of a lifetime. So, I'm entirely open to seeing how our choice to combine our lives and fortunes will continue to bless us both.

Q. Anything that has surprised you?

A. Many things, but I will name two. Both having to do with unexpected feelings. First, I was able to visit Alert Bay with Melissa in 2016. I recall how I felt walking across the open field where the Residential School had been razed and visiting the adjacent cultural centre. Such a powerful mixture of grief for the past that was memorialized, awe at the sense of standing on hallowed ground, and hope for a future that might develop from the ongoing work of reconciliation.

And then there was the rush of emotion that came when I was in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, attending the "House and Spouse" gathering of ACoC bishops. The entire group was entertained at the official residence of the Lieutenant Governor, who addressed us in an impressively cordial and graceful way. At the conclusion of her hospitality, 100 voices broke into a full-throated rendition of *God Save the Queen*. It was offered reverently and unanimously, and I was surprised to feel overcome, sensing the love and respect that filled the room. Let's say that I knew that I wasn't in Kansas.

Q. In conclusion is there anything that you would like to add?

A. Well, I have gone on too long already, but I do have one last thought. I could not have known six and a half years ago how the decision to stay the course with my Seattle-based counseling practice would influence me going forward. Of course, my choice always met with Melissa's support. And inasmuch as counseling has been a relatively recent second career, I am glad to have had the time and continuity to acquire depth and confidence in my work. Yet I do wonder what might have happened had I gone "all in" with her move—bought a house together in Vancouver, found a new job, taken my diaconal role to the next level, savoured (rather than savored) the poutine. I suspect it would have been a wonderful choice as well.

What I hope is that, to the extent anyone thinks about it at all, no one sees me as half-hearted about the diocese or the quality of its service and servants. I am whole-hearted in supporting my wife and in caring for those in New West who work to better know and reveal the love of Christ in our midst. And I am whole-heartedly grateful for the ways in which that love has been shown to me in these last years. ✠



At St. Philip in the Philippines where he preached February 2019.



Modeling a Filipino G-String, just received.



Interviewee and interviewer.

"One of the creative challenges and satisfactions of diaconal ministry is to embody God's reconciling love in new environments and contexts."



The happy couple take a pew during their wedding, August 15, 2015.



Eric's son Hans at his dad's wedding rehearsal dinner, August 14, 2015.



With daughter Sara.