

FOCUS ON LEADERS AND LEARNING

Hunger for education fuels well-loved teacher

From farm wife to professor, Maxine Hancock's love for learning is a life-long quest

Patricia Paddey
Special to ChristianWeek

On a sunny day in 1988, Arlette Zinck walked into a small seminar room at the University of Alberta. She'd been struggling with the decision of whether or not to pursue a PhD, and a sympathetic professor had suggested she sit in on his graduate seminar. The room, overlooking the Saskatchewan River at the edge of campus, was flooded with the soft light of late afternoon, streaming in through an entire wall of glass.

At the head of a table—around which an intimate group was seated—sat Maxine Hancock. She was lecturing on the moment of the fall in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. For Zinck, the moment was both magical and transformative.

"Maxine was so full of life and so fully and obviously rooted in this profoundly Christian view of the world," she recalls. "I was literally struck dumb." In that moment Zinck knew she was meant to continue her studies.

"I realized our minds are God's gift, and to use this mind well is a means to glorify God," she says. Today, Zinck, who is dean of the Faculty of Arts at The King's University College in Edmonton, says with gratitude, "Maxine is the reason I went into my PhD program."

Remarkable accomplishment

The two women would go on to become friends. And Hancock would go on to become Professor (today, Professor Emerita) of Interdisciplinary Studies and Spiritual Theology at Regent College in Vancouver.

It is a remarkable accomplishment for a woman who only began graduate studies in middle age, after she and her husband, Campbell, had raised their four children on a family grain farm in east-central Alberta. But higher education was no mid-life crisis. It had been luring Hancock for years.

A high school English teacher prior to the birth of her first child, Hancock had planned to establish herself in freelance writing once her children came along.

"It obviously took a few years," she says. "I had four children born in six years so it was very busy, but in that time I also began



Maxine Hancock and her husband Campbell.



Maxine Hancock is Professor Emerita of Interdisciplinary Studies at Regent College in Vancouver.

to freelance regularly and to pace my articles so that by the time my first child was in Grade 1, I was publishing my first book" (*Love, Honor and Be Free*, Moody, 1975).

She published a lot of books during the years her children were in school (for a complete list, see her web site: www.maxinehancock.ca), her time "beautifully framed" by the fact that the farm was busy in spring and summer, then quieter in winter when the children were at school. They were productive years that also saw her become well known in Canada for her conference speaking and broadcasting.

But Hancock yearned for more schooling. "My deep desire was to have a deeper research capability, a broader base. And I felt like I had worked as far as I could out of the resources I had. I was just hungry for more education."

She had always been an excellent student, but

she admits going back to school in middle age took more than desire alone.

"It took a sense of call, and God's provision for sure," concedes Hancock, "plus a sense of timing."

With a farm to run and children to launch, it also took a supportive partner and a fierce belief that graduate studies were indeed what God had called her to. Still, they were challenging years.

"I think I was tired and stressed," she says, then pauses before adding, "I think that during graduate study, you're just tired and stressed a lot of the time."

But she believes doing that kind of sustained, thoughtful, careful consideration and articulation gave her new muscles for her mind. "It was like working out for a marathon. It had that sense of 'Wow! This is tough, but boy does it feel good!'"

Hancock's youngest child, Geoff, experienced both ends of the learning cycle with his mother. "I've watched her learn and I've watched her teach," he says. "She taught me English in high school and she's a fine teacher. Yes, she's focused and passionate about learning, but her real joy has always been to pass on what she's learned to others."

Yet when Hancock—whom Zinck describes in such terms as "wonderfully vivacious," "exquisitely organized" and "achingly brilliant"—began teaching in 1993 at Vancouver's international graduate school of Christian studies, Regent College, she did so with modest ambitions.

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FOCUS ON LEADERS AND LEARNING

Marked for life

Faye Sonier's love for law, life and learning serves a higher purpose

Patricia Paddey
Special to ChristianWeek

Shortly after Faye Sonier began working with the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (EFC) as legal counsel, she told her pastor she wanted to combine her full-time work with studies for a master's degree in theology.

Her pastor counseled her against it. And with good reason. Not only was Sonier newly married, but she was still recovering from a bout of follicular carcinoma (cancer of the thyroid). The young woman had enough going on in her life.

But you don't survive a close encounter with a deadly disease without it leaving a mark. And Sonier is marked with a passionate appreciation for both the gift of life, and for its Giver.

As one of two lawyers at the EFC, since 2008 Sonier has been responsible for two key files, the life file and the religious freedom file. "The life file includes euthanasia, assisted suicide, reproductive and genetic technologies, abortion and fetal rights," Sonier explains. "The religious freedom file touches on anything that's related to religious freedom. So in the context of education—as it relates to parental authority and religious freedom—speech issues, freedom of assembly, anything and everything.

"The Christian Horizons case, we worked on that. [Quebec's] Ethics and Religious Culture Course, we worked on that. And then in addition, I have an internal role in terms of the legal issues the EFC has to deal with on the inside—charity law, employment law issues, those things."

They are weighty responsibilities for one so young. But at 29, Sonier has proven herself up to the challenge. One look at her resumé tells you as much. She began her post-secondary education at the University of Ottawa, working toward a degree in psychology and criminology. But only two years into her studies she applied to law school; straight 'A' marks and numerous scholarships for academic excellence opened the door.

Immediately upon completion of the requirements for her law degree (three years of study, Bar Exams, followed by nine months of articling under the supervision of a lawyer), Sonier caught the eye of Don Hutchinson, vice-president, general legal counsel and director of the EFC's Centre for Faith and Public Life.

"I met Faye at the Christian Legal Fellowship Conference," says Hutchinson. "She was sharing on some points about religious freedom that were of great interest to her. I was impressed with that because one of my hobbies before I joined the EFC was Canadian religious freedom matters. So I had a follow-up meeting with her to find out if she had some interest in working in the field."

She had the interest. "When I went to law school, I'd been a

Christian for about five or six years and I knew I wanted to serve in some capacity," Sonier says. "But I wasn't really sure how...I just left it in God's hands."

But when the offer to join the EFC came along, she recognized it as being heaven sent. "I was able to jump into a field that I knew I wanted," she says. "It was really an incredible opportunity, fresh out of law school."

Undoubtedly. But it took an incredible person with incredible drive and a passion for learning to seize the opportunity and make the most of it. "She works really hard," says her friend and colleague in life issues, Andrea Mrozek. "She's her own worst critic at times. She's one of those people who goes above and beyond, and works really, really hard and then is nervous about whether she did a good enough job."



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Faye Sonier is legal counsel for the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada.


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FOCUS ON LEADERS AND LEARNING

Sonier

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“She’s a real gift to the EFC.” Sonier says she loves to learn and believes study has made her “a better thinker and a better communicator.”

She applies that enthusiasm to all areas of her life. “Faye has a desire to improve herself as a human being,” says Hutchinson, “and that includes improving herself both personally and professionally.”

Those who know her describe her battle to regain full health and strength following her recovery from cancer in epic terms. Hutchinson says she dove into learning about health, food and nutrition with the same “deep study and discipline” she applies to so many other areas of life. She learned how to garden, took organic gardening courses and spends anywhere from two to four hours cooking in her kitchen each day.

“I don’t think anybody was happier when we moved into our new office space,” Hutchinson says, “because we were getting a full-sized fridge. The little one just didn’t accommodate all the fresh vegetables she was eating.”

But Sonier doesn’t keep her love of study and learning to herself, the things she learns bubble over, to be shared with those around her.

Responsible for working with interns at the Centre for Faith and Public Life, “she does really well with them,” says Mrozek. “She incorporates them into her life in a fuller way, forging strong friendships. That’s far more valuable than a formal mentoring program.”

*“Apologetics is very important
Developing a biblical worldview
is incredibly essential.”*

“I’m really big on the idea of mentorship,” Sonier concedes. “I’ve always made an effort to seek mentors out in various fields and areas of my own life, and they’ve really helped me think critically through various issues.”

But ask her what kind of Christian training she considers most helpful for the realities of leadership in today’s world, and she gives a different response. “Apologetics is very important,” she says. “Developing a biblical worldview is incredibly essential.”

As for the value of higher education for Christians, that’s easy. “It provides incredible opportunities,” she says. “Because I have a law

degree, I’m invited to various meetings, conferences and asked for my advice or legal opinion on things. It’s opened a lot of doors to means of ministry that I probably wouldn’t have had otherwise.”

She may have taken a pause in formal studies, but the learning hasn’t stopped, and the pause is likely only temporary.

“I’m interested in so many things,” Sonier says. “I’ve thought about doing a masters of law. There are a number of issues I’d love to study. That’s one of the reasons that right now I’m praying for direction.”

If past experience is any indication, leaving it in God’s hands will put her right where He wants her to be.

Hancock

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“I’d come thinking that if I could ignite a dozen scholars, that would be a wonderful multiplication of my short academic candle,” Maxine says.

“I always thought of myself as a little candle that had started fairly small. But if I could light 12 tall tapers for a lifetime of scholarship and teaching, that would be good work.”

It was years later, while mulling over the possibility of retirement, that she started to number the scholars she’d helped kindle and realized—to her joy—that she’d done the work she’d been called to do. “There was a lovely sense of completion and relief,” she says. “I came to a point where I could say what Jesus said in John 17, ‘Father, I’ve done the work you gave me to do.’”

New chapter begins

And so began a fresh chapter in the scholar’s life, a chapter she describes on her web site.

“After more than 30 years of farming in Alberta and a dozen years in Vancouver, we have moved to the Annapolis Valley of Nova Scotia,” she writes, “to establish a ‘Grandparent Farm,’ where all our grandchildren can touch the earth, watch the tides and feel the breeze.”

At Windhover Place (the name she and her husband have given their new home) Hancock, 68, is still learning. But the lessons aren’t

“If there’s anything that I’m trying to learn now—it’s how to be stiller and not so urgent.”

found in any textbook. She speaks of learning how to practice the disciplines of her writing craft with “a gentle joyfulness.”

“I’m still just finding my feet,” she says, one year into official retirement. “I think the dear companionship of a lifelong marriage is a huge part of my life now and a treasured thing I don’t want to hurry past.

“If there’s anything that I’m trying to learn now—it’s how to be stiller and not so urgent.”

Ask her to comment on the value of formal study to our culture today, and she recalls a conversation she once had with Canadian poet Margaret Avison. “She told me that scholars are the earthworms who toil away out of sight, underground, to silently till and aerate the soil out of which all ideas grow.”

The Church, Maxine says, needs to see the work of the scholar as “underground work,” aerating the roots of culture.

“I would say to people, seek all the education you can, that your giftedness calls you into, and that your opportunities can afford.”



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