

Reflections on a Summer Baptism

First Mennonite Church Calgary



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Every so often, if your eyes are open, you get a glimpse of the Holy! It is a holy encounter that wraps you in a time of wonder and awe, an encounter that needs to be experienced in the present – not remembered from the past or anticipated at some time in the future. It is an encounter with God that defies description; mere words fail to do it justice. Yet, some of us experienced the holy this past summer.

It had been months since our congregation at Calgary First Mennonite had met in our sanctuary for worship, due to the pandemic-related restrictions. So when two of our young people, who had been taking baptism preparation classes with Pastor Caleb over Zoom, wondered aloud if it would be possible to be baptized in the river, we prayed, and collectively held our breaths, hoping that restrictions would be lifted enough for even a few to meet at Camp Valaqua and have the baptism in the Little Red Deer River that runs through camp. And God answered our prayers.



On Sunday, August 23, a few of us from church, along with family and friends, gathered on the banks of the river to celebrate the baptism and receiving into membership of Margo Ratzlaff and Nathan Burgess. Both Margo and Nathan felt that God had become real and personal to them in nature, specifically in church camps. In Margo's words: "My baptism was wonderful. Even during my baptism classes I wanted to be baptized in the river at Camp Valaqua. With Covid-19, the river began to seem like less of a possibility since gatherings were being limited and camp being pretty much shut down. However, through God's grace, we were still able to have a baptism service at camp and I was so happy. The weather was perfect, and I was able to have my baptism surrounded by my church family."



We met at the side of the river, in small cohorts, and wearing masks, being aware of keeping a safe distance between the groups. Moni Janssen led us in worship. We sang of God's love and faithfulness, and listened to Pastor Caleb's message from Luke 15. This was followed by the personal testimonies of Margo and Nathan. We then moved into the river, where they were, in turn, immersed in the clean, clear water of the Little Red Deer. Nathan's words: When I think of baptism, the metaphor of entering a new chapter in life comes to mind. This past summer I had the opportunity to be baptized at Camp Valaqua in the Little Red Deer River.



It was a special time and place; having my immediate family be witness to my baptism while being at Camp. Although I didn't attend Camp Valaqua growing up, summer camp has held special memories as I remember it as a place to grow spiritually and make connections.



With my wife and our two children present, I was able to share a significant growing experience with them. I look forward to entering this new chapter in my life and seeing what God has in store for me.”

After the formal part of the service, we moved to higher ground to share a meal and the Lord’s Supper. Of course, the “sharing” was limited to each cohort, but we could all see each other and for the first time in months, come close to having meaningful communion as a community of faith. And for a few hours, we were taken “out of the pandemic” and given a chance to worship God in a way that was fresh.