

NTC grads grateful for love and support on road to degrees

Some students spend a long time earning their college degrees. For Jane Samson, it took 16 years.

You can't blame her for taking so long to earn her master of theological studies degree from Newman Theological College. She was taking courses part-time, trying to fit them into free time, while working as a full-time as a history professor at the University of Alberta and a single parent to her son.

Still, Samson said she wouldn't change a thing.

"I loved being at Newman. I loved the courses and the people. I guess it's a product of being an academic," said Samson, who is graduating this fall. "When someone is good at a sport, participating in that doesn't feel like work. It's what I'm used to."



Jane Samson

Samson is among 35 students who will receive their diplomas at the Oct. 19 convocation ceremony.

Six will receive master of divinity degrees, including two newly ordained priests. Three will graduate with bachelor's degrees in theology. Twenty-five students will graduate with master's degrees in religious education (MRE), including 16 from the Edmonton Catholic School Division.

All of Newman's MRE candidates study part-time while they work as teachers.

Graduating students say they are grateful to Newman Theological College for giving them the flexibility to work their studies around jobs and family life.

Samson was a part-time student while working as a full-time professor and parent. To put her studies into perspective, her son Alexander Dowsey was three years old when she started. He's now 19 and a first-year classics student at the University of Alberta.

Linda Chiupka, who graduates with a master of divinity degree, began her studies part-time and then switched to full-time. She came to Edmonton to study while her husband remained in Ontario.

"It was my first time living alone," Chiupka recalled. "It was surprisingly easy because I had so much support from the college. I thought, both my kids had degrees so I saw it as doable."

Linda Chiupka and Jane Samson took different paths to Newman.

Samson had considered ordination in the Anglican Church when she began studying at the college, the alma mater of her parish rector, Rev. Eileen Conway, and Bishop Jane Alexander of the Anglican Diocese of Edmonton. Conway is also a former member of the Newman college senate.



Jane Samson began her studies at Newman Theological College when her son Alexander Dowsey was three years old. Courtesy of Jane Samson

Sometimes Samson was only able to take one course a year at Newman, depending on her teaching load at the U of A. Other times, she would spend late nights and weekends studying, researching and writing.

Samson would drop her son off at day care during the times she had to be on the Newman campus.

"I never felt like I wouldn't make it," she added. "I thought I could do it, and at times it was hard, but I always did what I could manage."

Coincidentally, Samson graduates less than a week after the canonization of the

college's namesake. John Henry Newman, the 19th-century English cardinal and theologian, was canonized along with four women at the Vatican on Oct. 13. Newman is considered a saint in both the Anglican and Catholic traditions.

Although she decided against ordination, Samson said her theological studies degree helps her personally as a lay reader in the Anglican Church and professionally. Her specialty is 19th-century missions to the Pacific Islands.

"Over the years, the theology courses at Newman have helped me in my own research," Samson said. "As I learned more, it helped me understand the theology of mission."

When she began her studies, the current college building under construction. Samson and other students took classes in rented space in Sherwood Park, which made for an interesting winter commute about 11 years ago when she was temporarily on crutches. Franciscan brothers helped out.

"I had a good relationship with the Franciscans in my class. They would come to my house, pick me up, carry my books and help me into class. I had an entourage with me! Without them I wouldn't have made it. I loved them all so much," Samson said. "I've met the most fantastic people along the way."

When Linda Chiupka began her studies, she said she was a living example of Newman Theological College's motto: *Faith seeking understanding*. A lifelong Catholic, she twice found herself strongly on the defensive and that was one time too many.

"I couldn't handle it. I had to get up, leave the conversation and go back in the house," she recalled.

"I found myself having to defend my faith and not feeling equipped to do it. I felt like my faith was under attack. From then on I was determined never to be in a position where I couldn't defend my faith."

Chiupka immersed herself not only in Scripture, but in apologetics, research and commentary – so much so that when her husband Wayne casually suggested she take up formal study, she took it seriously.

"I said, 'Would you support me in that?' and he said yes," recalled Chiupka, a mother of two adult children who was working as a supervisor with Parks Canada at time. "I laughed it off, but it led me to a deeper thought: Maybe it was the Holy Spirit setting me on a path. So I took a leap."

Chiupka chose Newman because it was a Canadian institution and it had a bachelor of theology program which, for an older student like her, meant a more concentrated form of study compared to a bachelor of arts degree.

In 2014, Chiupka began as a part-time student, taking courses online from her home in Marathon, Ont.

Sitting in her car, writing a paper on her laptop, one of her adjunct professors, Les McKeown of Vancouver, asked if she'd consider taking a master's degree. Chiupka dismissed it since she didn't have an undergraduate degree. But later, her friend and academic adviser, Stéphane Saulnier, reinforced the idea. Based on her work, the college allowed her to take the master's program.

While at Newman, Chiupka immersed herself in student life. She served as secretary and later president of the students' association. She successfully auditioned and sang with the choir at St. Joseph's Basilica. And she completed a practicum at the Edmonton Remand Centre.



Linda Chiupka says her husband Wayne helped convince her she should study at Newman
Courtesy of Linda Chiupka

Since then, Chiupka – now a grandmother of two – has moved to an acreage in Brandon, Man., where her son lives and where she was hired as synod implementation coordinator with the Archdiocese of Winnipeg. Chiupka's husband plans to join her.

At 58, Chiupka was asked when she plans to retire. "Never! Working for the Church is something that I love, so it doesn't feel like work for me. I've always identified strongly with my faith, so I think this has been part of God's plan."

As both Chiupka and Samson prepared to accept their diplomas, they said their learning continues.

Samson now has four degrees and she hasn't ruled out going back to school. She had no immediate plans. "It's like having children. I have no plans, but I don't know what's possibly in the cards."

And Chiupka said although she has a master of divinity degree, she feels she's barely scratched the surface when it comes to faith seeking understanding. "God is so big that I always feel like I'm just at the beginning of learning about Him."

