



We Are Church, We Are Called

50•40•10

WOMEN'S ORDINATION ANNIVERSARIES

Proclaiming, Reforming, Celebrating: Stories of 50|40|10



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

ELCA.org/50yearsofordainedwomen

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PREFACE

The year 2020 marked 50 years since members of the American Lutheran Church and Lutheran Church in America voted to change their policies and allow women to be ordained. The year 2019 marked the 40th anniversary of the first women of color being ordained in these predecessor bodies to the ELCA, and 10 years since the voting members of the ELCA Churchwide Assembly allowed people in lifelong, same-gender, monogamous relationships to be ordained.

Though the COVID-19 pandemic thwarted many of the plans for celebration and lamentation around these anniversaries, the following authors took the time to write down stories that they wanted to share with the church. Thank you, authors, for accepting the invitation.

As followers of Jesus, we know that stories are important. In reading the stories of these women, it becomes even more clear that sharing experiences among our peers and across generations is essential. The stories that are different from ours help us to appreciate the breadth and depth of experiences of this facet of the body of Christ. We can see what has changed over time and what has not. The stories that echo our own lives remind us that we are not alone. All of the stories are presented with minimal editing to preserve the authors' voices.

For some women in this collection, the first woman's voice they heard preaching from a

pulpit was their own. For others, their first experiences of Word and Sacrament came through women: that was their childhood norm. And yet, so many of the stresses around the ministry of women have not changed over the past 50 years. A theme threaded throughout the stories is God calling a woman and the church not recognizing the call or making space for her. We see this theme in the stories of white women in the 1950s and '60s, and it continues to echo in the stories of women of color living today. This thread continues for queer pastors, whose calls have finally been recognized as valid but who, too often, are still told, "Not yet, not here." The pain of God calling and of not being able to answer is real. The pain of God calling but of having to deal with sexist comments, low pay and job insecurity to follow that call is also real. This pattern has persisted for generations of pastors. As the body of Christ, we are all harmed by it. How is God calling us to listen better, to do better?

These women's stories also are connected through themes of love and joy. No matter where these pastors served or what they faced, God still worked through them. God sustained them through song, through laughter and hugs, through friends and strangers.

Hopefully this collection will offer some sustenance for you.

For more resources around the anniversaries, go to [ELCA.org/50yearsofordainedwomen](https://www.elca.org/50yearsofordainedwomen). To learn about the gender justice ministries of the ELCA go to [ELCA.org/justiceforwomen](https://www.elca.org/justiceforwomen). To hear more stories of rostered women of color, check out [ELCA.org/rwoc](https://www.elca.org/rwoc). For resource and stories about LGBTQIA+ pastors, go to Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries' website at [elm.org](https://www.elm.org).

INTRODUCTION

When first elected presiding bishop, I was always asked what it meant to be the first woman entrusted with this call. I didn't like the question then. I am still ambivalent about it now.

Why, in the 21st century, did my gender matter? Why, in 2013, was the election of a woman historic? I didn't understand all the fuss. My parents had raised me to believe that if I worked hard enough I could be whatever I wanted to be when I grew up. My maternal grandmother was a businesswoman in the 1930s. My pediatrician was a woman. My high school biology teacher had her doctorate. All in the last century. However, "the question" does draw me to reflect on my journey as a minister of Word and Sacrament.

We had a faithful home. Church was an important part of our lives. Sunday school, Sunday worship, vacation Bible school (I am pretty adept at illustrating salvation history with pipe cleaners and Popsicle sticks) and the seasons of the church year all shaped my life. I remember watching my mother as she went about her duties as a member of the altar guild. I was about 5 or 6 and was allowed to sit on a step between the chancel and the sacristy. The women (yes, they were all women) wore white gloves and head coverings when they served on their assigned Sunday. It seemed reverent and mysterious. God was real and close. So, when asked by my junior high guidance counselor what I wanted to be when I grew up, I answered: "A Lutheran pastor." Women can't be pastors, he told me, and that was that.

During my senior year in high school, my father had open-heart surgery. In 1973 this was a serious and risky procedure. My faith was shaken, and this caused me to ask all the existential questions: Why do bad things

happen to good people? If God is omnipotent and loving, why is there suffering? Is there a God? What does life mean? I presented these questions to my pastor, John Evans, and waited for answers. Instead of lecturing me, he gave me the space and the grace to question and think more deeply. Then I went off to college.

College is not always conducive to church attendance. Having Sunday morning follow Saturday night on a college campus is not the best arrangement. I drifted but still had my list of questions. Then something unexpected happened — I went to a fine Presbyterian college and the assistant campus chaplain was a woman! So I sent her my list, and she also encouraged me to question, doubt and explore. I wasn't the only one. She invited several of us to meet with her. We called ourselves the Heretics Group.

By my senior year in college, despite my music education major, I knew I didn't want to be a band director. I applied to divinity school and was accepted! By now the Lutheran Church in America (an ELCA predecessor) had been ordaining women for seven years. By the end of my first year of Div. school I felt deeply called to Word and Sacrament ministry. I contacted my bishop and let him know. That is not how the process works. One meets with one's bishop before one attends seminary. Oops. Nevertheless, my bishop brought me into the fold. I was a model candidate after that. I was ordained in 1981.

The 40 years I have served have been a blessing. I was encouraged by my pastors, supported by my church and extended calls by congregations. But the 40 years have not been without difficulty. Early on I was often the only woman at clergy gatherings. The legitimacy of my call was challenged. My compensation was less than that of my male colleagues. In every

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congregation I served, people left because they could not accept a woman pastor. Once, while I was pumping gas in my clerics, a shocked man exclaimed, "I've never seen a woman before!"

I may be the first woman elected presiding bishop, but there were other firsts: Elizabeth Platz, the first woman ordained in the Lutheran tradition in North America; Lydia Rivera Kalb and Earlean Miller, the first women of color ordained in the Lutheran tradition in North America; April Ullring Larson, the first woman elected synod bishop in the ELCA; and Jessica Crist, first woman elected chair of the Conference of Bishops. Their courage, trust in the Spirit's call, and faithful service have been a source of strength for me and a gift to Christ's church.

During my internship, at a clergy retreat where I was the only woman, I was asked why I wasn't "shrill" like those other women. I am

pretty sure those "other women" were not shrill, just definite and determined. I answered that I didn't have to be, because those women had opened up a path for me. We didn't say yes to God's call because we wanted to be pioneers or trailblazers, or to make some kind of statement. We said yes because God's call is irresistible, because of the joy of serving the gospel, because of the great privilege of walking with people as the deep love of Jesus becomes real for them.

If I have any wisdom to impart to a woman or girl considering becoming a pastor, it would be this: Trust the Spirit's prompting, don't rely on yourself alone, pray, make use of the means of grace, develop confidence shaped by humility, and believe that God doesn't call you where God can't keep you.

The Rev. Elizabeth Eaton serves as Presiding Bishop of the ELCA.

STORIES

Imposing Ashes



One very powerful thing I have been blessed to do as a pastor has been the imposition of ashes on Ash Wednesday. This is a practice that was not common in my home congregation, so I first experienced it myself as a youth director headed toward seminary (though I didn't know that last part yet). I ended up having an in-depth conversation with the senior pastor at the church where I worked about the practice that first year, and I have found it to be a powerful experience on both sides — giving and receiving — ever since.

I have done things differently over the years. My first year as a pastor I went a little heavy on the oil, so the second year I just put extra lotion on my hands right before service, thinking that might be enough (it was not). By the third year I had finally gotten my amounts straight. Then there was the year that I was doing a “Five Senses” theme for Lent, so I got hyssop oil to mix with the ashes to go with the psalm for the night, “Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean.” That turned out to be a fun touchstone for people that I still use.

When I started ministry as a single young lady, I thought the most difficult imposition of ashes would be putting ashes on your own child. How hard I thought it would be to be reminded of the mortality of a little one whose life you had housed in your own body! And indeed the first time I did that was hard. But, it was not as hard as putting ashes on the foreheads of two young girls who had recently lost their mother, as their father looked on.

The most emotionally fraught imposition of ashes for me, though, came earlier this year. I was transitioning between calls, so I

was able to preach and preside at my home congregation this year, which is helpful since they don't have their own called pastor. As it turned out, Ash Wednesday 2020 fell just three weeks after we had my mother's funeral in that sanctuary.

So I found myself at the front of my little home church, on the chancel steps where I had been confirmed, ordained and married, and where, just a few weeks earlier, we had stood to greet family and friends before services, putting ashes on my father's head. It was hard to look into his eyes and see the pain of grief as I smeared the ash cross on his forehead. It was hard to speak to him, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return,” as neither of us felt in particular need of that reminder in the moment. And it was crushing to think, just three weeks after laying my mom to rest, that one day I would come back into this space to do it all over again for my father. It is still hard to remember that moment without tears.

But, an Ash Wednesday service does not end with the imposition of ashes. The service continues, leading us through a mini-Lent from the imposition of ashes through to the remembrance of the death and resurrection of Jesus in our Lord's Supper. We are people who live with the mark of mortality on our brow, but we journey together toward a time when we will be on the other side of that divide. Toward a time when we have passed from life into life — when we will all be together once again at the wedding feast of the Lamb. And then, for just a moment, we are given the gift itself. It looks like a bit of bread and a sip of wine, but it is so much more than that. It is the body of our Lord, given to knit us together in one body. A body that cannot be separated by time or space, by death or place. A body that is truly united, no matter the divisions this world seems to put in our way.

I looked into the eyes of those I had known since my youth, whose foreheads were smudged by mortality, and fed them the bread of life. And for just a moment, in that place where the saints of my youth had received the sacrament, had worshiped and prayed, I felt that unity. I felt the presence of those who had communed with me the first time I had received the sacrament on my confirmation day. I felt the hands laid on and stretched forward, to bless then to receive the bread and wine, on the day I was ordained into the ministry of Word and Sacrament. I felt those who had packed into that little building when Grant and I were united in love, an event that included us administering the sacrament to all those who had come to support us that day. And most of all I felt the presence of my mother, who, though gone from our sight, is alive with Christ and present in the cloud of witnesses each time we share that holy sacramental meal.

May you, dear reader, know the joy of being knit into the body of Christ, and be filled with the presence of the great cloud of witnesses — Christians around the globe from all times and all places — as you walk through the large and small “Lents” this life has in store. Amen.

The Rev. Amanda Applehans was ordained in 2009 and most recently served as the Young Adults in Global Mission country co-coordinator for Madagascar with her husband, the Rev. Grant Applehans.

New Thing



I am about to do a
new thing;
now it springs forth, do you
not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.

—Isaiah 43:19

I was fortunate to have been raised in a denomination that ordained women long before I was born. My father was a United Methodist pastor who deeply respected his female colleagues. My mother raised me to be a strong, courageous woman like her. She created the red stole for my ordination. My father preached on Isaiah 43:19. Bishop April Ulring Larson invited both to join her as I knelt to be ordained.

I embraced Lutheran theology back at Southwest Minnesota State University, where my campus pastor, a dear friend and mentor, was first to verbalize my external call. As I sat in his office the spring of my senior year, he asked, “Have you come to discuss seminary?” He put into words the very thing that had been nudging me, yet I wrestled another six years before beginning seminary.

My first call was to serve as associate pastor in a large congregation in Wisconsin. The chair of the call committee began my interview by announcing that she “did not believe in women pastors” but ended it by assuring the committee that I had changed her mind. Her initial perspective on women in ministry echoed the bias expressed by the ELCA pastor I had been required to meet with as part of the seminary admission process. He had begun that conversation by saying he “did not believe in women pastors.”

If I could go back, I would challenge my younger self to question, “What does it even mean for someone to say they do not believe in women pastors?” That is as foolish as saying we do not believe in any of the other beautiful things that God has ordained. Saying we do not believe in something has no bearing on its existence, its relevance or its God-given role for the good of the community.

Looking back, I realize how, rather than recognize that flawed perspective as a reflection on those who held it, I allowed their doubt to drive my ministry. I felt that I needed to work twice as hard as my male colleagues to prove women’s fitness for ministry. I was proud to learn that I was followed by a female pastor in all three of the parishes I had served, always as their first female pastor. I perceived this as an important achievement: doing my part to open the door for other women in ministry.

I continued to push myself, neglecting self-care and the most important relationships in my life, in order to demonstrate my leadership capabilities within a male-dominated Catholic health care system where I led the ethics program for an 850-bed hospital, three specialty hospitals, five rural hospitals and 190 clinics. I increased my caseload every time my senior VP said, “I just don’t know if Springfield is ready for a female ethics director,” responding to three times as many ethics consults as a male colleague in a much smaller hospital. I proudly accepted the nickname bestowed upon me by the Sisters of Mercy: “Energizer Bunny.”

Then one morning I got into my car after a routine mammogram and broke down in tears. I had finally hit the wall. I had lost my sense of purpose and joy in serving, along with my health and vitality. An insightful physician recognized my health crisis as moral distress and urged me to stop working myself to death and begin the long journey of healing. I left my work so my soul could be restored.

Accompanied by many brave and faithful sisters and brothers in Christ, I have gradually recovered my vision. Like the eyes of a released prisoner, my eyes are still adjusting to the bright expanse of the sky above.

I hope that I did help open doors for other women in ministry, but more than that I hope other women might learn from my example. I pray you realize your innate value and experience your call as God’s claim on you. There is no additional requirement to prove your worthiness or demonstrate your ability to “hold your own” as a woman.

**You are gifted! You are beautiful!
You are enough!**

There was a moment in my first call when I heard that most clearly. It was a day or two after the congregation had welcomed me with a picnic by the lake, where one little girl could not take her eyes off me. She had never seen a female pastor before. I know this because she was the one who answered the phone when I called to speak with her mother. When I told her that “Pastor Linda” was calling, she paused and drew in a deep breath filled with awe, then, failing to cover the receiver, shouted to her mother, “Mom, it’s the New God calling from church!”

I had done nothing to earn her admiration. Her childlike faith simply allowed her to see that God was doing a new thing. Her world had expanded in ways she could express only through pure joy and trust.

God is made visible through us: female, male, old, young, LGBTQ+ and people of all colors and cultures. It is not about our work but about God’s work in us.

That truth was proclaimed ever so boldly by a little girl. Claim and hold tightly to that precious truth!

God, help us to recognize your voice in the faithful exclamations of children. Dispel our doubts. Free us from false proclamations and meaningless pursuits. Renew our hope. Raise us to new life through the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Rev. Linda M. Bollenbach attended Wartburg Theological Seminary and was ordained in 1995, serving parishes in Tomah, Edgar and Stanley, Wisconsin, before serving as chaplain and later as ethics manager at Mercy Hospital in Springfield, Missouri, stepping down in 2017 to heal and embrace new life.

Welcomed to Campus Ministry



My first call was to campus ministry. When I began at University of Chicago in 1996, everyone serving students, staff and faculty anywhere in the country gathered for several days in the summer for learning, sharing and fellowship.

At my first gathering, a woman serving at the University of Maryland came up to me and welcomed me to campus ministry. Her name was Beth Platz. She did the same with each woman who was new that year, and I saw that she knew all the women in the system. She had a lot of experience, and she was very generous in sharing it. She was one of my most gracious colleagues. Only much later did I connect Beth with Elizabeth Platz, the first woman ordained by a Lutheran church body in North America.

Thank you, God, for leaders such as Beth Platz, who not only led us into your wide circle of ministry but also helped us find our place and our way in your service. Thank you

for continuing to lift up new women among us to speak your word to the world in their own voices.

Nancy Goede received her M.Div. from the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago and was ordained in 1996. She is currently the parish pastor at Augustana Lutheran Church of Hyde Park, Chicago, Illinois.


Welcomed Beyond Our Knowing



After a midday walk sifting mindfully through 40 years of incredible stories, hoping one would emerge saying “Tell me!” many vied beautifully for the telling; my final pastoral act on internship; reading to my congregation Earlean Miller’s acceptance of their call to serve as pastor of Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, Greensboro, N.C. (1979, first African American female pastor in American Lutheranism); an elder detailing a loved one’s crossing over the thin place called death; a shared keynote on the Holy Spirit with Rabbi Julie; a toddler assuring a convalescing senior of Jesus’ presence; accompanying Jim in his final weeks living with AIDS; and multitudes more.

Jim’s story recalled a Scripture, and it was this—the Romans 5 text on “access to grace” that rose for the telling. So, here is one precious story out of many in my 40 years of ordained ministry. A story of incredible goodbyes, culminating in unexpected, border-crossing hospitality and love.

Our Southwest California Synod office received a call from an out-of-state pastor asking if a Lutheran pastor in Los Angeles would accompany the brother (Jim) of an active member of her congregation. Jim was



at a local AIDS hospice with an assumed few weeks to live. The family was concerned Jim had been deeply hurt by the church's judgment of his sexual orientation. The sister and parents wanted him to know their love and the church's care. I received the referral and made an initial visit to Jim, who was on a ventilator. His hand motions and nods expressed his alertness.

By that time, I had spoken by phone to Jim's sister, who asked me to convey to him her love and the love of their elderly, frail parents. "They all love you very much," I told Jim when we met. "Do you know that?" Yes, he nodded passionately, holding my hand with equal strength. I acknowledged their distance and that his parents' failing health precluded their visiting. I was there at their behest. "Can you sense their love through me?" Yes, returned a now tearing-up nod and another warm grasp of my hand.

"God loves you too. Do you know that?" Yes, nodding and holding, with tears flowing. I visited Jim regularly and we communicated deeply in this tactile way. Jim did not survive the weeks they had hoped but died peacefully, entrusted to the love he trusted had not let him go.

These were pre-cell phone days. I was in the waiting room, allowing the hospice workers to prepare to move Jim, when a call came to the hospital from the sister. She was, of course, in tears, but not only in response to Jim's death. With shock still present in her voice, she shared that their parents' home pastor, who, they had assumed, would preside at Jim's funeral, had just told them he was not allowed to by his denomination because of Jim's sexual orientation.

The sister was at an impasse. "What will we do?" After some tears, she thought anew and asked, "Would it be possible for you to fly here and preside?" "Of course," I said, "I'll gladly come."

I flew to the parents' Midwest town and they provided for my every need. We planned the service but were not allowed to use the church sanctuary because of the nature of the funeral. The church organist, however, insisted she would join me at the local mortuary to play for the service. Gathered that day were family, friends, church members and me, their guest pastor.

My homily included Romans 8:39: "[Nothing] will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus." I told the family that Jim knew this and wanted them to know it too. "Nothing will separate them from God's love either." Romans 5:1-2 also spoke: "We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God." Jim now knew that glory fully, rejoicing that his family had access to this same grace. All were held in life and in death.

I will never forget gazing into the swollen eyes of the 80-year-old parents nodding affirmations as I told them of my weeks with their son, and of his assurance of their love and God's. After the funeral, we were invited to a reception provided by the congregation.

Although the pastor was not allowed to preside, and we were not welcome in the sanctuary, the pastor saw nothing preventing us from using the church basement. The women of the church who joined us at the mortuary for the funeral had left quickly to prepare to welcome all to a reception in the basement of the church.

The pastor also saw nothing preventing him from meeting me outside the basement door and sending me in to offer the table blessing. He was in tears, broken by the rules he had to follow to keep serving these loving people. They had made a joint decision that this was the best way through this maze. Though my being a woman pastor broke more rules, he ushered me through the door. "Please pray with them," he asked and left me to be their pastor in his absence.

The reception was a celebration of love. As Jim's sister took me to the airport, she handed me Minnesota Twins homer hankies for my two young sons. It was 1991, a year the Twins won the World Series. Love won too, in Jim's life and family, and mine, in ways beyond our knowing.

Let us pray:

Thank you, most loving God, for the power of your eternal welcome. Teach us to joyously extend this welcome now, among us, through Christ our Savior. Amen.

The Rev. Margaret (Peg) Schultz-Akerson, M.Div. (Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, 1980), D.Min. (Claremont School of Theology, 2002), who celebrated her 40th anniversary of ordination July 2020 (along with her husband, the Rev. Reg), serves Lutheran Church of the Master, Los Angeles, California.

A Real Pastor



My first call was to a congregation whose building was surrounded by fields outside a small town in Michigan. It had a tall bell tower and a red door and was the very picture of a small country church. The congregation was filled with farmers, factory workers and teachers who

loved God and their neighbors. Being a few miles away from the highway or any main roads through any of the nearby towns, we didn't get a whole lot of visitors. When we did, they were usually relatives of members or ELCA Lutherans from other areas who were visiting the tourist area in the next town over.

One Sunday morning, a visitor showed up and sat by himself near the middle of the small sanctuary. He didn't seem to be connected to a member, so I made a point of introducing myself to him before worship began. Being both young (no more than 30 at the time) and female, I made it a point to wear my clerical collar every time I led worship so I would be easily identifiable as the pastor.

"Hello!" I greeted the man, "I'm Pastor Rachel. Welcome to St. Matthew's."

The man responded with his name, and we chatted briefly about what brought him to the congregation that morning, what to expect in the service, and the like. Then he asked, "Who is the pastor here?"

Caught slightly off guard after my introduction, I looked down at my cleric, looked back at the man, and said, "I am."

"No," he said, "I'm looking for the real pastor, you know, a man."

I could feel the eyes of some of my congregation members on me as I thought about how to respond. After a moment's hesitation, I said, "Well, I'm the only pastor here, so I'm as real as you're going to get." Then I excused myself to finish getting ready for worship.

The man stayed for worship, but he never visited again. I guess I wasn't real enough for him.

A few years later, after I had taken my second call at a larger congregation in a larger town across the state from my first call, a local entrepreneur stopped by to pitch his staff coaching program to me and our youth director (who is also a woman). After his pitch, he said, “Can I just say something on a personal note?”

We looked at each other, curious, then said, “Sure.”

“I think it’s wonderful that this church has chosen to be led by women. My mom was the strong leader of our family when I was growing up, and my grandmom and aunties were strong women, too. This church made a bold choice putting women in charge. They made a good choice.”

He was absolutely right in ways I hadn’t even considered until that moment. This congregation called me and hired women to serve in many of the other staff positions as well, and nobody questions our “realness” or our ability to do the work to which God and the community has called us. It is bold. It is faithful. It is good.

Loving God, you have made us who we are and called us to serve in your name. Give us boldness to proclaim Jesus, the way, the truth and the life for all people, in all we say and do. Amen.

The Rev. Rachel Laughlin graduated from Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary, was ordained in 2010 and has served two congregations in the North/West Lower Michigan Synod.

Sometimes It’s “Only” Being a Woman in Ministry



One year ago, having started my fifth call in a new synod in a new state, I headed off to my first ministerial meeting in this new community. As soon as I entered the room, I could sense the shift. I scanned left and right, found the familiar face of the one who had invited me, and noted that every single person in the room besides me was male. Wow! It wasn’t that this was a new experience for me, but it had been a long time — years — since I had found myself in this situation of being the one and only woman at such a gathering.

Back in the 1980s and 1990s, the early years of my life in ministry, I had come to expect that I would be the only woman in the room. Throughout my internship year, I was the only woman at text study, and on my internship cluster retreat, I was the only woman amongst all of those supervisors and intern pastors. My first call was to a three-point parish, and when I attended my first council meeting for one of those congregations, I became the first woman ever to sit at their council meetings.

Add on various colleague groups and synod committees and even CPE, and there were plenty of times for me to get used to being the only woman in the room; however, one never really gets used to it. One adapts and learns to cope and does a lot of deep breathing, but being the obvious one who is different from the rest is an incredibly vulnerable and oftentimes lonely position in which to be.

It is easy to feel intimidated when one is the “only” in the room. It often feels safer to observe and speak as little as possible. My many experiences of being the “only” in the room or at the table have forged my commitment to do what I can to prevent that

experience for others, lest they be the only woman or the only person of color or the only youth or the only (you fill in the blank) person in the room.

For many years, I felt the weight of the burden that came with being the “only” and thus often the one on whom others based their judgements about ALL women clergy. While I waited a year for my first call, I did a great deal of pulpit supply, and virtually everywhere I went, I was the first woman to preach from that pulpit, the first woman to lead worship in that sanctuary.

I came to realize the significance that their one experience with me could potentially have. If they had a positive experience with me leading worship, they might conclude that women pastors are “OK.” BUT, if I slipped up in any way, if I was anything less than eloquent, poised, articulate, animated and inspiring, it would also be easy for them to conclude that women pastors really do not have what it takes.

I see a similar dynamic at play when we — women and men who are middle-class, white and heterosexual — who are in positions of privilege neglect to expand who is in the room or at the table. We may be inclined to pat ourselves on the backs for inviting to the table ONE person of color, ONE member of the LGBTQIA+ community, ONE youth or young adult. But it is neither fair nor healthy to put others in such vulnerable positions nor to place such weight on the shoulders of ONE person to represent an entire community.

In the moment of that more recent first ministerial meeting, I will admit that I felt overwhelmed. After that meeting, however, I knew that silence was not the answer. Others needed to know this reality, and indeed, as I opened up about my experience, I had some great conversations with women and men, parishioners and neighbors and community

leaders. Naming this inequity was an important first step in addressing the limitations of who was included in that room. I remain the only woman pastor at those meetings, but other women in lay ministry have now been welcomed into that room.

“I wonder ... ” has become one of my favorite conversation starters. I wonder whose voices are missing. ... I wonder whom else we need to invite to the table and whom we need to invite to the table in sufficient numbers. ... I wonder how to encourage the loudest voices amongst us to talk less and listen more. ... I wonder how God will delight and surprise us, as we dare to follow where the Spirit leads.

O God of life, open our eyes to recognize who is missing from our decision-making tables. Open our ears to hear voices that bring important perspective. Open our hearts to embrace the fullness of who we are as your beloved people. Amen.

From rural to small city, from worshipping communities of a dozen to many hundreds, Pastor Karen Rask Behling has been serving congregations in the Midwest since her ordination in 1990.

Ask Good Questions



“But what will happen when the baby gets sick?”

An interview for a potential call finally came 15 months after my graduation from seminary. What made it an especially interesting experience was that I happened to be eight months pregnant with our first child.

Now, it was not unheard of for any graduate to wait months for an interview opportunity in 1988. Calls were often slow to arrive when

synods were served by new personnel who were overseeing the process in territory that was largely new to them. Overall, there were not as many openings, and there was no shortage of pastors ready to serve.

But gender was also undeniably a factor in this particular setting. There was no way to leave our unborn child out of the equation for this initial interview, which I was eager to engage. In my memory, most of the questions in this meeting with a predominantly male call committee really focused on how a young woman who was going to be a new mother could possibly manage to serve in both capacities. The truth was this: I didn't know either. But I believed that if God called me to a particular work, God would help us find a way together.

“I believe that it is not biblical for a lawyer to live in church property.”

Say what? Finally another interview opportunity came along — this one in a setting that had been open for months. The bishop knew the congregation well and had said earlier to the young woman seminary graduate awaiting call that he would not include her name on the slate because “they will never call a woman.” Whether through persistence or desperation, the bishop changed his mind.

The first meeting with the call committee came. It was a large group, perhaps 15 men and women sitting around tables in a church basement. No prepared interview structure, just rich conversation. The very next day the committee chair called the bishop's office — the committee was ready to recommend

this young woman and convene the special congregational meetings needed for the two-point parish to proceed with a call.

The process had moved quickly. I was excited and also apprehensive. This was a congregation where the bishop had clearly perceived resistance to the idea of women serving as pastors. But maybe it was different when the concept became real: this woman could be their pastor? Coming 20 years after the predecessor church bodies had voted to ordain women, I wondered — had members of the congregation studied the reason and spirit in which this decision had been made? “Probably not,” I was told. But also “in my experience, once a call committee has decided — the call vote is essentially a rubber stamp.”

Except, not this time. Two weeks after the interview the congregations were meeting. The assistant to the bishop attended and later relayed to me the dynamics of the meeting that yielded a “yes” vote from one congregation and a “no” from the other (two votes short of the percentage needed to call). The meeting had seemed routine, he told me — a verbal introduction by the call committee witnessing to the reasons they felt the Holy Spirit leading them to this decision. “Are there any questions?” they asked.

Well, no, not really. At least no questions addressing the particular candidate with the particular gifts. The question is one of biblical interpretation. The question is raised about the young pastor awaiting call, but it's couched in a commentary about her husband. And the assistant to the bishop witnesses the moment but is not able to change it (or actually willing to try).

“I was one of the people who voted no.”

Eventually the young woman who graduated in 1987 was called to serve a small, rural congregation. This time a key leader had made a special trip to the bishop's office to say that "it would be best" if the call committee would not receive any female nominees. Fortunately, the bishop was intentional about sharing this perspective with me.

It helped me to know this information. As the interview ensued, eventually I was simply able to ask, "So the bishop says that you don't want to call a woman. Can you tell me why?" The Spirit led us through an open and illuminating conversation about this perspective — which was not shared by the whole committee.

I remember a particular moment in a hospital room, about five years into this call, as a lengthy disease process had taken a toll on a beloved elder member. The white-haired man had been poked and prodded yet was nonetheless dignified when he beckoned me to lean in more closely so I could hear his weakened voice after we had shared the sacrament and prayed together.

"Pastor, I want you to know," he said, "that I'm one of the people who cast a negative vote on whether to issue you the call." Pause. Then quietly: "I was wrong." Tears came to my eyes, to be gifted with such honesty from this beloved saint whose funeral homily I was planning within the week.

Were these things "normal" when I started? Let's just say they were not unheard of by others. I'm certain that the questions our LGBTQ siblings in Christ receive when they interview will have their own uniqueness. I'm also certain that there is plenty of work for us to do to till the soil in congregations so that future committees might be prepared to have real conversations and to ask good questions.

Gracious God, when our brother Jesus faced resistance and controversy, he often asked powerful questions. Equip us with your wisdom and insight, grace and mercy. Teach us to listen as we seek to discern your call to us this day. Amen.

Pastor Kathy Gerking was ordained 30 years ago after three years of waiting and now serves with the people of St. Timothy's Lutheran in Omaha, Nebraska.

Called to Persist in Being Faithful



This year marks the 42nd anniversary of the ordination of women of color in this church.

It was on Oct. 30, 1980, at 7 p.m. that I was ordained to the ministry of Word and Sacrament. Though I had been called to serve Cross Lutheran Church in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, I returned to my home church, St. Luke Lutheran Church (then known as the Lutheran Association) in Ithaca, New York. This was the church in which I worshiped throughout college. It was the church where I was married. It was the church that encouraged me, supported me and loved me while I was in seminary. This was my home parish that I loved. I went home as the first daughter of the congregation to be ordained and the first person to be ordained in that parish since Franklin Clark Fry. Bishop Edward Perry, one of the strong advocates for the ordination of women, ordained me. It was on that evening that I joined the group of women who are known as the Magnificent Seven, the nickname for the first seven women of color ordained in the Lutheran church.

In those days, it was not unusual to have congregations openly state they would not consider a candidate who was a woman, a person of color or someone with a disability. Being in an interracial marriage added another factor to the mix of objections. Yet through it all, God has been faithful, finding ways to walk with me in ministry, keeping me faithful to my call to ministry, whether serving as pastor, as chaplain, as bishop, or as interim pastor. As I reflect over these 40 years in ministry, two touchstones have been key in shaping how I approach ministry.

The first occurred in my first call. The congregation, located near downtown Milwaukee, was blessed with a large number of children, many of whom lived in economically challenged households. As in many neighborhoods (yes, even in the suburbs) drug houses were present. One afternoon, while walking in our community (yes, we used to do this regularly back then), I observed one of my youth enter a residence known to be a drug house. With the boldness of the Spirit, clothed in my clerical collar, I walked up to the door and knocked. The man who answered the door looked at me with a puzzled expression. I heard myself say, “Tell Joseph [not his real name] to come out here.” The man said, “What?” and I repeated myself with hands on my hips (by this time I had noticed the bulge at his waist). I don’t know what that man thought with this young, Black woman in a clerical collar standing on the porch, but in short order the young man came out. I said, “We’re leaving!” and grabbed his arm, and off we went. Once off the porch and down the street, I turned him toward me, looked him squarely in the eyes and said, “What were you thinking?” It was one of many opportunities to learn that being bold in the Spirit, protecting those who need protecting, and speaking the truth in love were necessary to be in ministry. Years later this young man introduced me to his wife, saying, “I am the man I am today

because this pastor walked to the door of a drug house and called me out.”

The second ministry-shaping event occurred in another congregation I served. I had been called to serve on the pastoral team with only two opposing votes. As a woman, who happened to be Black, that was truly amazing. I joined a fantastic ministry partner whom I had known for a few years. The welcome was generally warm, yet there was one person who made it abundantly clear that he was not open to my being there. He was very verbal in stating that I was not his pastor and “never would be.” He would address me using only my first name while addressing my white, male colleague as “Pastor.” He would not listen to anything I had to say or participate in anything where I was the lead. Though a lifelong Midwesterner, he did not do Midwest nice — I knew exactly where I stood with him. In spite of others telling him he shouldn’t be that way, he persisted. As he was a valued member of this congregation’s leadership, this was discouraging.

In prayer, I committed to erring on the side of grace as I had long been rooted in the idea of beloved community. Though challenged at every contact with him, I continued to treat him as the sibling in Christ that he was, even if he didn’t see it that way. My father was fond of saying water is thicker than blood. Whether this man knew it or liked it, we were related through Christ in our baptism. That fact has ramifications for how we are called to treat each other. I committed to live what I believe — that God loves each of us, as we are without regard to the things the world says are separators — gender, race, ethnicity, who we



love, economic status or the like. God loved us when we were yet sinners and loves us into changing into who God calls us to be. My call is to live that out even as I speak the truth in love. The journey was rough, yet I persisted. I often found myself repeating in my head what a Roman Catholic sister friend said about a difficult person in her life: “God loves him, and I’m trying.”

About 18 months into this call there was a come-to-Jesus moment. During Sunday worship, this gentleman collapsed. Paramedics were called, resulting in him being taken to the hospital. As I was not preaching that day, I left worship to be with him and his wife at the hospital. After some time, his wife and I were allowed into his room. The nurse was assuring him that he would be alright. He looked up and said to her, “I know I will be fine because my pastor is here!” I actually turned around, expecting to see my colleague behind me; however, he wasn’t. It was at that moment that the Holy Spirit enabled us to truly see each other as God saw us — siblings in Christ. I had been called to be his pastor even though he had not voted for me. And he was called to see me as the servant of God who would walk with and care for him in time of crisis. That day sealed our relationship in Christian love. Certainly, there were times that we would disagree in the next 10 years I served that parish. He continued to be the critical senior in the congregation, which was a voice we needed to hear. But for him, from that day forward, he would call me “Pastor,” seeking me as his spiritual leader along his faith journey. In public I was addressed as “Pastor Thomas-Breitfeld” or sometimes just “Pastor.”

Whatever title I’ve had throughout the years — pastor, chaplain, co-pastor, interim pastor, lead pastor or bishop — walking the ministry road has often been arduous, yet I know I am called to persist in being faithful. I’ve had to be the faithful pastoral presence often in

the face of adversity. The call to ministry is to be prayerful and persistent, speak the truth to power in love, speak for those who are vulnerable, be bold in the Spirit and be public in our proclamation. I know the call to ministry certainly has been these things for me throughout these past 40 years.

Importantly, we are called to remember that we serve a God who remains faithful, accompanying us along the way. God is good, all the time. And, all the time, God is good. This is most certainly true!

The Rev. Viviane Elise Thomas-Breitfeld was ordained on October 30, 1980.

You Are Called to Do WHAT?



I started volunteering for a general crisis line while in college. After answering a call from a young girl who was being abused, I started reading about the topic and talking to women about the issue. I heard from many more people and kept volunteering after graduation. Listening to dozens of rape survivors, I got angry that I wasn’t hearing about these stories of violence against women at the church I attended. I experienced institutionalized and colleague resistance to my call from God, but I persevered and branched out to people who had experienced battering. The Holy Spirit kept paving the way.

I graduated seminary in a time when there were a lot of clergy and a low retirement rate and when a lot of congregations did not want to have a female pastor. As I waited for a call, I worked as the rape services coordinator in

a big city. The women clergy in the synod felt that the church needed someone who could connect spiritual healing and people in the pews. These clergy knew that there was a need for an ordained woman to bridge the gap between spiritual healing and the horror of violence against women, children and men. We gathered together and came up with a plan for a new ministry. One of the inner-city churches agreed to extend me a call to be their second pastor for six months and then to start a “ministry of healing” for survivors of violence at their church. The call had no money attached to it. I raised funds for all of the expenses. Later, the bishop told me that if he had looked closely at the letter of call, he would never have signed it because there was no salary for me as the pastor. I felt lucky to have this opportunity just as the ELCA was forming. I continue to be grateful for the women who taught me how to write grants and to fill out a 501(c)(3) application. They were some of the first people on the board of directors. This ministry lasted for six years and ended when women kept coming to me to tell me their stories of abuse by ELCA clergy. The Lutheran churches did not want to fund a ministry that brought their pastors’ abuse out into the open.

There were not many clergywomen when I was ordained. There were no women clergy shirts, so I bought a men’s shirt and added darts. Some women made their own clergy shirts or had a relative make them. Each of us knows that if we ever leave the ministry we need to pass on our shirts to other women. They are expensive and are really helpful for others.

The things I have said to the many women that I have mentored are:

I support you. I will always listen to you. God has blessed you with many gifts for ministry. Don’t let hurdles be a tall fence. Be strategic. Bring

your whole self to your ministry. You may not fit into a church’s “slot,” but God called you, so keep saying YES to God’s call.

God, you are like a hen who gathers her chicks around her. You have surprised many of us with a call to ministry. Thank you for showing us how to follow our call so that we can live outside of the boxes that others have created for us. We have experienced many emotions as leaders in the church: joy, frustration, sadness, delight, compassion, resistance, hurt and thankfulness. In our times of quiet many of us have been able to feel like one of your chicks that you gather close to you. Thank you for the adventure of ministry. AMEN.

Pastor Connie Winter-Eulberg, ordained 1988: God called me into ministry to walk alongside people who have experienced sexual and domestic violence, and when that ministry ended, I stayed for other adventures.

Resetting the Relationship: Changing and Growing



I had served the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Peace for about three and a half years when I became pregnant with my second child. My husband, John, and I were very excited. Our daughter was sort of excited. Our congregation was very anxious. They had never had to work with a pregnant pastor before. And, unlike my first pregnancy, where I didn’t show at all until I was almost seven months pregnant, this time, my body remembered pregnancy and I looked pregnant from about four months on! That didn’t help my congregation’s anxiety.



It seemed like the anxiety of the congregation was out of proportion to what was happening and getting worse! A secret group was meeting about the problem of this (pregnant) pastor. I got the help of a woman pastor who had served as my congregation's interim and asked for support from the bishop's office. Things got worse until they got better, and this is why.

It turned out that congregation was afraid that I would leave them once I had the baby. They were getting angry because they were afraid that I would abandon them once I gave birth. I was so surprised! They were surprised at my surprise. The barriers melted and the church began to plan a shower for me!

I was still puzzled though as to why they thought I would leave them, so I started checking around with the women clergy and the bishop and my dean. I discovered that, by sheer accident, I was going to be the first woman pastor in the synod who was going to have a baby, use a short maternity leave and come right back to work. All the women before me in our synod had left their congregations or taken leaves of two to four years and, once their children were back in school, came back to their congregations.

Wow. I had been ordained in the 16th year after women were permitted to be ordained in the Lutheran churches in the United States. I thought for sure that I was more of a builder on the first foundations of the work of the women before me. I never expected to be a "first" at anything. I ended up helping my conference and my congregation figure out a maternity leave. That was not enough, however. I needed

to help my congregation believe that I was there to stay, with a new baby.

After our son was born (don't tell jokes about preaching during labor or you will be the floor chaplain even as you rest after your delivery!), I decided to use my maternity leave to reinforce my commitment to the congregation. I attended worship at my church, sitting in the congregation, sitting with my family and listening to my colleagues preach. I passed the baby around to the congregation, letting them get to know Nathan and giving myself time to hug our 6-year-old daughter, Sarah, who was adjusting to being a sister and a new kindergarten student. We started talking about how John was a clergy spouse and how lucky it was for us all that he was so good at being a father. I asked for advice from other young mothers and some of the elders of the church. I set up a gradual reentry, which worked for me, giving me time to gain strength, and created fewer sharp turns for the church.

In the end, the birth of our son helped to heal some distrust that had built up over several pastorates. I, who had felt like an interim for the first three years of my tenure there and had expected three more years of that dynamic, discovered that staying and sharing the new baby turned me into their settled pastor and them into a much happier congregation. I ended up staying there for 12 and a half years, nine of which were as a redevelopment pastor. I honestly think that if I hadn't used the maternity leave as a way to reset our relationship as pastor and congregation, they would have never agreed to change and grow.

Pamela Hunter was ordained in 1986 in the New England Synod for the Upstate New York Synod.

Guided, Affirmed and Blessed by the Holy Spirit



I enrolled at Wartburg Theological Seminary in the fall of 1971 and graduated in May of 1976. Ordination was at St. John Lutheran Church in Cedar Falls, Iowa, on Aug. 15, 1976, a date chosen to honor the Assumption of Mary.

The American Lutheran Church (ALC) congregation in Shelby, Iowa, extended a call to me. I accepted and began serving this small, rural parish (much like the one in which I grew up) in September of 1976.

I am still proud of them and grateful that they made what was then a bold move in calling a woman pastor. They were kind, helped me learn from my mistakes and encouraged me to do my best as we made our way through what was a big transition for everyone.

I served United Lutheran for a little over four years, until I received and accepted a call to Lutheran Campus Ministry in Madison, Wisconsin, where I was on staff with the Rev. Phil Knutson and the Rev. H. Gerard Knoche, both of blessed memory.

After moving to Madison, I continued to receive updates from United Lutheran about what was going on, plans being made, special occasions. One day, I received a letter (remember them?) from a woman whose little girl had been born while I was the pastor there. I had the privilege of baptizing that child. “My” first baptism. What a joy!

The letter came when United Lutheran Church was still searching for a pastor. By that time, the little girl was five years old. Her mother

reported that as candidates (all men) came and went, one Sunday her daughter turned to her and said, “Why can’t we have a REAL pastor? Like Pastor Mary. You know, a girl pastor!”

Evidence that the world was, indeed, turning.

On June 24, 2017, I was invited to present Jennifer Scott Michael for ordination to the ministry of Word and Sacrament. Pastor Michael is well known to many women in Women of the ELCA.

While I was serving what turned out to be a four-year-plus interim at St. Paul Lutheran in Pensacola, Florida, Jenny and I became friends, working and praying together as she went through the process of discernment.

On the day when she was ordained, there was a surprising personal moment when the thought struck me: “She could have been that little girl who wanted a REAL pastor,” all those years ago. It felt as though this circle had been completed.

During these 44 years, I have served 17 calls. These were parish ministries, campus ministries and several interim calls. Right now, I’m on the Florida-Bahamas roster, serving my second interim with St. Paul Lutheran Church in Pensacola. Like most everybody, we are doing our best to be creative as we continue to worship and to serve others. For several months, Zoom has been our worship space. The recorded worship service is available on Facebook. We are hoping to resume (very carefully) in-person worship sometime soon.

For six months, a couple of years back, there was another interim, this time with St. Christopher’s Episcopal Church in Pensacola when it was in the search process for an assistant priest. It was a wonderful experience in itself and an opportunity to put “skin” on our denomination’s full communion.

My spouse, Major Joel Lindemann (United States Marine Corps, retired), and I moved to Milton, Florida, in October of 2007. Joel had lived in Pensacola, taking flight training there after his 1975 graduation from the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, and convinced me that this would be a wonderful move. He was right. We are “dug in” and live with three dogs and a cat. We celebrated our 20th wedding anniversary on December 30.

So many times, for so many reasons, I say prayers of thanksgiving to God for the life I’ve been blessed to live, for the countless times the Holy Spirit has guided me away from possible disaster and has helped me learn from those experiences. The Spirit, acting through a variety of means, affirmed my call to Word and Sacrament ministry whenever I had my doubts about why and how and whether to go on as a pastor.

I do hope to retire before too long. Having more time together, traveling, working on landscaping, being with the really great friends we’ve made here, worshiping with both St. Paul and St. Christopher’s are some of the plans we hope to make part of our everyday life. Both of us are getting a little creaky, but ... I am looking forward to lots of reading, sitting on the back porch and enjoying the sounds of the Corinthian Bells wind chimes, a gift from Joel on the occasion of my 44th anniversary of ordination.

I pray for peace and courage for us all as we travel on in our pilgrimage.

Pastor Mary E. Peterson currently serves St. Paul Lutheran Church in Pensacola, Florida.

“Why would God choose a single mother?”



I am a three-months-old ordained pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). I am originally from Sierra Leone, West Africa, a single mother and the associate pastor for multicultural ministry at the Epiphany Lutheran Church in Conyers, Ga. As a female pastor in the ELCA, my journey may be similar to so many but also differs from a lot.

Let me start by saying that I was born in Sierra Leone and migrated to the United States in 1994. I lived in New York for three years and then moved to Georgia in 1997, where I have lived since then. In pursuit of rekindling my spiritual thirst, I found the St. Stephen Lutheran Church in Decatur, Georgia where I was first introduced to the Lutheran denomination. I fell in love with the church. I loved the congregation. I loved its way of worship. It was not so different from the church I grew up in, the Church of the United Brethren in Christ, USA.

I felt broken and lost but immediately found what I was looking for. I quickly found myself being a part of several ministries and helping out in worship. I became part of the worship team and became a worship assistant and a council member. I enjoyed doing just that as it filled my spiritual quest.

However, during these moments, little did I know that the pastors and the congregation were watching me and noticed the pastoral gifts in me. They would always ask me if I ever thought of being a pastor because they truly believed that I would be a good pastor. I had no doubts about what they saw and felt it myself, but I was a single mother and was drowning in school loans as I had just completed a master’s program in library and

information systems and just could not see myself picking up another loan to go to seminary. Amongst all other things, I also did not feel myself worthy of being a pastor: “Why would God choose a single mother?”

However, I was informed and encouraged to try the TEEM (Theological Education for Emerging Ministries) program. This is a program that allows people such as me to keep their jobs and take seminary classes. Even though I was still skeptical, I decided to try it and, with no doubts whatsoever, loved it. I went through the program, and here I am today, an ordained pastor.

To women and young girls who are considering being pastors, I would like to say, for me, being a pastor has been the most rewarding thing I have ever experienced in this short time I have been ordained. It brings me so much joy to share God’s words with others. However, the journey is not an easy one. Despite the coursework, there are so many challenges.

Let’s start with being a woman in a church that is male-dominated in a society where so many still think that women are not supposed to be pastors. A society that still struggles with women being in the pulpit. It is scary when each time you have to defend or prove to others that women are worthy of being pastors. Secondly, being a woman of color seems to make it even more difficult. Getting closer to the end of my coursework and candidacy, I was constantly reminded of how many women of color had finished their coursework and gone through the candidacy experience and were still waiting for a call. It was scary; I saw women who had waited for three to five years before they had a call. I also saw that there were some women still waiting.

I am not only a woman of color; I have an accent and a different cultural background. I am an African, and that scared me: “What was I thinking?” I don’t know what I was thinking, but I knew God had called me for a reason and believed that God would pull me through.

For my internship, I was sent to a predominantly “white” congregation. It seemed like I was thrown into the lion’s den. The perfect setup! How was I going to survive was the first thing I asked myself. But trusting God, I went in there believing God’s plans for me: “plans for my welfare and not for harm, to give me a future with hope” (Jeremiah 29:11). I stayed true to who I am. I love being a pastor; I love people; I love to share my struggles with others and give them hope. I enjoy putting a smile on people’s faces, and if I have to cry with them too, then that’s just what I will do. By the end of my internship, the congregation and pastor fell in love with me and asked if I would be willing to answer a call as an associate pastor. I was honored and took the call.

To women and girls seeking to be a pastor, I would first and foremost like to say that you must love and want to be a pastor. You must want to serve people. You must have empathy and want to be there for others. It is a very humbling profession, but it can also be very rewarding. If you are thinking it is an easy job, let me say, no, it is not.

The journey is not easy either. There are several trials that may come with it, but remain strong and focused. Put God first and pray often. Have a good spiritual and God-fearing family support, friends and mentor(s). It is a

lonely journey, but stay prayed up, humble and ready to put in the work.

Merciful and gracious God, teach us to be strong and courageous. Open our eyes to see the needs of those around us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen!

Pastor Nyahaley Labor, associate pastor for multicultural ministry at Epiphany Lutheran Church, Conyers, Georgia.

Never Too Old to Start a New Endeavor



It's amazing to me that we are celebrating 50 years of the ordination of women in the ELCA. It's both a short time and a long time, depending on one's viewpoint at the moment!

When I first felt the call to ordination, I was attending a synodical women's retreat and we were singing "Here I Am, Lord." It was as if the Holy Spirit almost literally tapped me on the shoulder, and I started bawling right in the middle of the song! It was unexpected since I had never even considered ordination, had never seen a woman preach and was sure there must be some mistake. Going home to tell this "news" to my husband and two daughters in junior high was a challenge. We talked it over as a family, and my older daughter said, "If God is calling you, Mom, go for it!" What a surprise! My husband wasn't quite as enthusiastic!

So ... maybe just do a little more at church without actually being ordained. I was already leading a Bible study group in our home and was also active in our church choir and council. So I signed up as song leader for a women's retreat for our congregation — a wonderful

experience. But the "call" kept returning, nudging and continuing. After much soul-searching and many chats with friends and two women pastors I had met, I decided to try a semester of seminary. "OK, God, I'll just take one course — Greek — and if I pass that I'll keep going." OK — OK — OK — I passed, so it's going to happen. And I still praise God for my supporting family and friends, urging me on and saying all was OK. Even so, juggling time with family, homemaking, going to seminary and studying made for an "interesting" few years. Family time and prayer together on the eve of my ordination made it all seem just what God had planned.

I discovered that all my previous life experiences contributed beautifully to pastoral leadership. Teaching, studying and writing all helped in sermon preparation; training as a biologist was a huge asset during hospital visits, so I could add medical understanding to prayer support; being a wife and mother connected me with families and brought out that empathy that is so important in pastoral ministry; I had the advantage of years of experience. One is never too old to start a new endeavor!

There are also those days when just being female reminds us of the "acceptable" roles in our society. During one of my first years as a pastor, among the usual first-time visitors was a man who came in as I was starting worship. He sat down but then almost immediately went back out the door. One of the ushers asked if he was alright or needed assistance. "Oh no," he replied. "I just don't feel comfortable with a woman pastor." He didn't feel "comfortable." There have been others like him over the years. At first it's hurtful, but then I remember my call to ordination. I wasn't "comfortable" about it either! So hopefully the skeptics will come around as women become more evident and are seen as caring and capable in this leadership role.

Now that we're celebrating 50 years of ordained women in the ELCA, being a woman pastor is not as unusual as it once was. When I was in seminary, women made up about one-third of my class. However, most of them were not pursuing a Master or Doctor of Divinity degree. Rather, they were in music or teaching ministries. Now it's much more common for women to see ordained ministry as a goal and follow that call from the Holy Spirit. And as a result, congregations with women leaders are much more common and women pastors are more visible in the community outside the church as well. All this is making it much easier for a woman, at whatever age, to use the gifts and talents that God has provided as she accepts that incredible call to a new direction in fulfilling life serving our Lord as a pastor.

Gracious God, guide all women considering ordained ministry, that they may trust and listen to your Holy Spirit as they discern your path for them. Amen.

Pastor Ellen C. Jennrich, Southwest California Synod — b. 1939; married to Robert I. Jennrich; two children, five grandchildren; a "third career" pastor — college biology teacher (Ph.D., University of California, Los Angeles, 1966); stay-at-home mom; ELCA pastor (M.Div. 1996, ordained 1996); served three Southern California Lutheran churches; retired 2007; now leading a weekly women's Bible study and chair of our synod's global partners team.

Rooted in God's Word



My favorite story of my ministry is mentoring Maggie Westaby, a member of my congregation, to respond to God's call for the ministry of Word and Sacrament. When I met Maggie, she was serving as the chair of youth ministry on the church council. I noticed her potential

leadership skills in the way she interacted with parishioners. I invited her to be assisting minister, which she accepted gladly. I saw in Maggie a faithful disciple of Christ, open to learn and grow in faith. I asked her whether she felt God was calling her to the ministry of Word and Sacrament. She responded that she was not sure. I encouraged her to pray and talk to me and her family/friends about it. A few months later, Maggie texted me, expressing her desire to answer God's call for ministry. I was thrilled! I have been walking with Maggie in all the steps she has been taking toward ministry. I was happy to help her to enroll in Luther Seminary and prepare for synod call committee interviews. Now, Maggie is doing her internship at Messiah Lutheran Church in Oregon. I am looking forward to her ordination.

Many events in my life have shaped me as a pastor. One of these events was doing my Ph.D. degree in Hebrew Bible at Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. Learning to do research and using a critical approach to interpret the Bible has helped me understand my parishioners when they question their faith.

I discovered that part of my calling as a biblical scholar and minister is to build a bridge between church theology and academic theology. Usually, biblical scholars use a historical-critical approach to interpret Scripture and engage in philosophical discourse. Generally speaking, parishioners and pastors are not that much open to challenging their faith and tradition. I have met lots of Lutherans who consider the critical reading of Scripture as a sign of unfaithfulness to the word of God. As a pastor, I speak to my parishioners in a familiar language, not only an intellectual one. Being a scholar and a pastor has given me a chance to ask difficult questions and challenge my parishioners' inherited faith formulations. Building trust with my congregation has allowed me to discuss critical issues such as violence in the Bible. It has also

helped my congregation to have vital faith that is open to discussing intellectual questions.

When I became a pastor, I was surprised by my parishioners, who used to measure the church's success and growth by the number of people attending and the amount of money they contributed. The focus now is on being Christians to our community and the world instead of serving ourselves and seeking to fill our pews on Sunday. A vital church is the one that is excited about expressing its faith in words and deeds.

My word of wisdom I would like to share is that your faith and relationship with Christ is the cornerstone for your ministry. When you become a pastor, you will find that your ministry is not limited to the sacraments and preaching. You will find yourself interacting with your parishioners more than leading worship or administering the sacraments. Interacting with people and building relationships with your parishioners strengthen your ministry and build trust between you and them. Sometimes you feel disappointed or discouraged or even doubt your calling; for this reason, your faith and relationship with Jesus Christ are your shelters to make it through in difficult times. You will discover that ministry is not about power or prestige but humility and love. Rooted in God's Word and surrounding yourself with those who love you will help you grow in your vocation as a minister of Word and Sacrament.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God. Amen. Lord, help me to serve you with humility and love. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Niveen Ibrahim Sarras was born and raised in Bethlehem, Palestine. She was ordained on Oct. 29, 2016, and is serving at Immanuel Lutheran Church in Wausau, Wisconsin.

The Turquoise Bedroom Funeral



1976 - after growing up in the church and majoring in religion and philosophy in college, I continue to search. The church has been ordaining women for only five or so years, although I have known some Presbyterian and Methodist women pastors. I couldn't do that, I have always thought — too many small-minded people; I don't want to be their servant. Spending the academic year in the Twin Cities while my husband does graduate work at Luther Seminary, he advises me to take Dr. William Hulme's class on Job. It is profound, and I also read Dorothy L. Sayers' *The Mind of the Maker*. The Spirit comes to me through my intellect — my strongest path but the most open. By spring of 1977 I find myself on my knees, sobbing. I will go to seminary. We move again, and I begin three years of commuting to Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and one year of Lutheran internship. My Chevette is totally unreliable, eating up starters like candy. But off we trudge — every week to Pittsburgh and every weekend to churches up and down the Ohio River towns to be "the student preacher." And then there is the Trailways bus every Monday night to Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio, and the slow "milk train" bus home every Thursday through every small town between here and there. Finally, I am part of Trinity's graduating class of 1983, except I am already ordained while seven months pregnant and working in Baltimore, Maryland. We wonder, can apostolic succession happen in utero? My ordination is a great celebration for a congregation of inner-city folks whose glory days are behind them. My mother puts the stole over my shoulders and we both remember all that has come before — the World War II death of my father while I am an infant, leaving my 9-year old-daughter every week to commute and study, the stillborn son who comes during seminary

but does not stay, working out a marriage when I am gone every week for five years.

By 1986 I find that I float on a river of grace and have learned to love even the people I don't like too much. I see their souls on their faces, their fears and trials — compassion grows in me. Another almost 20 years pass of searching college students' and women's retreats and spiritual direction training, during which a baby daughter comes to us and our oldest, loveliest first-born daughter leaves via illness. The pain of loss rearranges my world forever and never leaves me in my deepest places, although I laugh and travel and enjoy many things in life. I finish my formal ministry career with ten-and-a-half years as a hospice chaplain. There are all kinds of people and situations. The hospice building lobby has a large aquarium. Sometimes I take patients there and we look at the fish swimming, hiding behind rocks and going in and out of little ceramic castles. "This beautiful purple or blue or yellow fish is you," I say to the patients. "Whatever happens, you are always swimming in God's loving presence — there is nowhere else to be." One day I am called to a patient in a very poor part of the city. It is okay because I have been an inner-city pastor and am not afraid. After knocking at the wrong door with the big barking dog, I am directed by a small Black child who clearly perceives me as "the strange white lady" to "go around back and up the stairs" (rickety) to another apartment. I arrive in a small apartment with one bedroom painted in a turquoise color that reminds me of my days in New York City's Spanish Harlem. In the bed is the dying woman, who can hardly speak. She has three female relatives who have driven up from West Virginia to say goodbye. They are all white, but the patient's husband is Black. There does not appear to be prejudice among any of them, and they are all focused on the patient. The room is small, and I can hardly get around the bed to her. It is summer and hot and stuffy. I invite their story and out

flows the memories of their family, of how the patient and her husband met at the factory where both worked, but she became ill, layoffs happened and there was very little money. There has been treatment but no hospital now, no church, no undertaker's large casket or organ music and flowers. There is that afternoon in the turquoise bedroom when I realize the patient is going to die this day and my visit is the only funeral she will have. I quickly organize in my head the simplest service we could possibly do — the simplest liturgy of greeting and prayer and a simple Scripture that we are loved and forgiven, and a place has been prepared for us. I encourage everyone to join in the Lord's Prayer, and then we sing "Amazing Grace." I embrace the patient and give her a last blessing; I embrace her female relatives and say goodbye. The husband has already left the room. I pick up my small supply bag and carefully descend the rickety outdoor staircase. In the yard the patient's husband comes up and embraces me. With tears welling up, he simply says, "I will never forget you. Thank you so much." I say, "I will never forget you or your wife or this day." I have long forgotten their faces and names, but I remember the turquoise bedroom. In all its crowdedness it was a place where love was expressed. Never have I known more clearly "surely the Lord is in this place." The presence of the Christ was palpable.

I retired in 2013 from a journey that had begun in childhood — searching for God. I let go of many things and became freely a servant to all. I live in peace now and practice gratitude every day in my journey.



May the compassion of the Holy One guide your vessel on the river of grace and bring you safely to harbor. Amen.

Karen Davis Thompson is a Pennsylvania native, born in 1943 and ordained at Martin Luther Church, Baltimore, Maryland, 1982.

Embodying the Challenging, Freeing, Wild Love of God



An entire roomful of disgruntled meeting attendees assumed I would have known how to use the church coffee maker and have coffee ready. They could not have been more wrong. On the other hand, people confide in me things they say they would never share with a male pastor: struggles with infertility or parenthood or details of an assault. There is an unwritten, extra phrase that should be added to the charge of ordination for women pastors: called to preach, teach, administer the sacraments and equip the saints for ministry while challenging assumptions about who a pastor is from all angles. Those assumptions may have evolved in the past 50 years, but be assured, they are still part of a woman pastor's daily life.

The most difficult assumption to confront is that pastors — as God's representatives — reflect what God is like. Perhaps we don't think we are attached to the cultural depiction of God as a white-bearded old man until a woman is in the pulpit and we cannot put our finger on it, but it just doesn't feel right. Yet when a mother preaches and compares her own experience to how God waits on us, bargains with us and redeems us when we go so far astray, parents are brought to tears by

being known by God in such an intimate way. Breakthroughs akin to these are met with the same ambivalence as the bodies of women pastors, received with great joy and gnashing of teeth. But know this: God became flesh and dwelt among us, and in us. Women pastors embody the challenging, freeing, wild love of God for people who desperately need to know it is real.

Live and minister as your full self, for you are who God created and called you to be. God speaks through your voice, ministers through your body and tends the world through your loving spirit. Amen.

Ordained in 2005, Lee Ann M. Pomrenke is the interim pastor at All Saints Lutheran in Eagan, Minnesota, and author of the 2020 book Embodied: Clergy Women and the Solidarity of a Mothering God.

Invited into the Holy Moments



When I began my first call in 1996, I knew that the vote to call me as pastor was not unanimous. Still it was a blessed partnership as both pastor and congregation grew in faith and love and hope through the years. Some voted against me becoming their pastor because they thought they had “done their part” by having a female pastor before me. Some figured that I might be a lot like their previous pastor because she was a woman (we are friends, but we have individual personalities). Some just didn't want a woman pastor (“I don't want a female pastor doing my funeral”). During my time at that congregation, a number of church members said, “I voted against calling you as our pastor, but I was wrong.” One of those members sadly later

died of cancer. I was honored to visit her while she was ill and to lead her funeral. I remember the funeral service vividly because her Catholic husband took communion from me that day for the first time ever. At his request, I continued to visit him and bring him communion until he also died a couple months later. I was asked by the family to lead his funeral as well. What an honor to be invited into these holy moments with so many people in so many settings throughout these 24 years. The Holy Spirit certainly has worked in unexpected ways and unexpected places throughout my ordained ministry in the ELCA.

May God guide each reader into new places as the Holy Spirit continues to surprise and inspire and bless us all through the many gifts that have been shared in the church.

Carla Thompson Powell was ordained in 1996 along with her husband, Darryl; currently serves as pastor of United in Faith Lutheran Church in Chicago; and lives in Elk Grove Village, Illinois.

A Viable Vision



There it lay on my desk, staring back at me. I looked down once again then deliberately picked it up and tossed it in the trash can. It did not go away. I still saw it in my mind's eye, and to my own chagrin I felt moisture and determined not one tear would fall. The report said I would not be eligible to pursue ordination in the ELCA because the ministry was deemed: not viable. It was a rejection of immense proportions. Prior to this I had been active in ministry for over 20 years. In New York I was part of a very large ministry that held yearly crusades numbering in the hundreds. We had a television celebrity preach at our revival, and as the minister of outreach, I had most

of the responsibility. I worked as an associate and youth pastor in this city before being specifically recruited by the ELCA because of my community ministry. I accepted the offer presented me with the promise that I would become an ordained pastor in this faith community. The synod sought to hire an African American female to fulfill their diversity goals. I was to develop a mission in this predominately socioeconomically impoverished minority neighborhood, which statistically had the highest crime rate in the city. I learned it was called Vietnam.

I was there diligently every day, seeking to be a presence in the neighborhood. I surmised that the neighbor with terminal cancer who, after my visits, decided to put his faith in the living Christ was not viable. Brother Carter, whom I met in our church pantry and who was now a former alcoholic, was not viable. The Tanzanian student who brought her family to our congregation was not viable because they didn't make much money. The mother who survived repeated childhood rapes by her mother's boyfriends, and the Sudanese mothers taking ESL with their little children at the church, were not viable. The children from foster and broken homes, deeply emotionally scarred, who took a chance on [Christ's] love at our church, were not viable. I was not viable. The intensity of the pain was acute because (a) your word to me was not honorable, I was assured of vocational ministry life; (b) even if this site did not lend itself to a Lutheran presence, surely I was still worthy of endorsement. The conclusion: you Miss. Minster, are impotent. For someone called by God to herald the gospel with the object of increasing the kingdom population, this sentence was devastating. This was not a job or career. I chose to align myself with this group of believers because of a holy calling and a divine mandate. I worked an additional three years, reapplied and was finally accepted to pursue the path of becoming an ELCA pastor.



An African American female United Methodist Church pastor and colleague was ruminating with me and mused, “Why are white men always withholding nurturing from us even though they impregnated us, and when we bring forth a dead child, they act surprised and want us to perform a resurrection.”

The physical church I was assigned to was so filthy it took three months just to clean it. I’ve never heard of this happening to a man. There I was, alone on this island called church.

I have been invited to be a mistress and even a first lady if I would stop preaching. At an ELCA pastor retreat I was told my ideas were too radical when it came to racial reconciliation procedures. I have attended many meetings where my voice was simply not heard, or maybe I was at that time of the month so my frustration at not being heard was excusable. At other times men in church thought it was okay to express angry words with me an inch from my face.

Ecumenically, I have had the same experience. I remember attending a citywide MLK banquet where all officers of this ministry alliance were seated at the podium except for me, the lone female, and to make it personal, one outstanding student from each high school was selected for a small scholarship. My daughter’s school chose her. She was there with all the other students but did not receive her funding as they did. I complained but got no results. Being the child of a female pastor has tentacles. The Ginger Rogers syndrome is real. We do everything the man does while dancing backward in high heels.

Strangely two of my most pleasant gratifying memories involve ministry with only men. The first occurred when I was a young woman. Few doors opened to me in the 70s, so I took the gospel message to the streets. People were hungry for a good meal, and the gospel satisfies the soul appetite. I was preaching before at least a hundred men at Rikers Island prison in New York. The guard wished me luck as he told me the crowd had been particularly rowdy all morning. The Spirit of the Lord stepped into the message. I have never seen it before or since personally; without exception every man in the room wanted prayer. They were all on their knees; many were weeping. Two prisoners from that service are still preaching today.

The second came from an invitation by the local homeless shelter to provide a Christmas service during the month of December. There were about 20 pastors throughout the city who had agreed to come. I was the lone Lutheran and female. When I got there with my team, I discovered it was at the men’s shelter. I had prepared a specific sermon geared for women. I shared my story of sexual and physical violence at the hands of men and how one man, one little baby boy had come into the world and given me redemptive purpose and passion. Then I handed out about 70 homemade quilts (sewn and donated by a retired pastor and his wife) and explained how, as the quilt was pierced by a needle sown with the thread of mercy, it is now a cover of grace by which you are warmed by the fire of God’s love. The men came forward en masse, in tears, seeking prayer for this wonderful man who loved them so. Months later the shelter director saw me at an ecumenical gathering and told me what the men had related to him: of all the services, they enjoyed mine the most. Additionally they wondered why I was the only one who brought a gift for them. Why not bring a gift? When I met Jesus, he brought a gift for me.

I am retired now, but in 1977 I had a vision. I was walking down a crowded street. As I stepped off the curb I looked up and saw an abundance of fish falling from the sky. Immediately I cried out, “The heavens are full of the glory of God.” I knew emphatically what the vision meant. Many folks take up fishing when they retire — but I’ve never stopped fishing. This is vision for a lifetime.

Dear Lord, you are gracious and good. We love you and thank you for being our Savior. We are told in the book of wisdom that without vision people perish, so we humbly ask to simply carry the light of the gospel through our words and deeds, so those in darkness may come to know the peace of God, which surpasses all human understanding. In the name of Christ Jesus, we pray, amen.

Helen Hollingsworth, ordained Nov. 11, 2006, is a retired ELCA pastor living in Georgia.

Practices Change Before Attitudes Do



When I was a seminary student, the words “practices change before attitudes do” seemed like a charming philosophical construct. I heard the words from the dean of students at a conference for women seminarians. But did these words have any basis in reality? And what did they have to do with me, anyway?

Over 30 years of ordained ministry, I learned the impact of these words. Allow me to share two examples. The first occurred shortly after I arrived at my first call as associate pastor of a large downtown church in the Midwest. I was standing in the office with the parish administrator; we were discussing the week’s

schedule. I walked Kermit, a longstanding member of the congregation. Without hesitation he looked at me and said, “Women should be barefoot and pregnant.” I was not prepared for the blunt statement but managed to reply, “Well, I couldn’t disagree more” and left it at that. Over the next few years Kermit’s wife experienced health problems that prevented her from attending worship. I visited them, offered communion and shared news of the congregation. Over the course of the visits, Kermit offered thanks for my ministry with his family. He expressed an attitude of gratitude that would not have been forthcoming if the practice of ordination had not changed.

Fast forward 20 years to the days after the farewell party at my last full-time call as senior pastor of a large congregation in the Upper Midwest. I was relaxing with the many cards and notes from parishioners. One stopped me short. It was from a woman who had attended the Saturday evening worship service. Margaret had been there almost every Saturday for the nine years I had served the congregation. Margaret’s area of service was quilting, so I also encountered her during the weekly quilting workday. She was quiet but usually greeted me with a cheery message for the week. On the farewell note Margaret had written, “When you came to the congregation, I didn’t think women should be pastors and I didn’t want you to come. I have appreciated your ministry. Now I don’t want you to leave.” I was stunned by this admission, since I had no idea Margaret harbored such an attitude.

The words of my seminary days came back: “Practices change before attitudes do.”

I am grateful for Kermit and Margaret and all the saints whom I have encountered along the way.

The Rev. Nancy I. Amacher

A Ministry Journey



When I entered Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia in 1975, my husband, John (aka Jack), and I had three small children who were just short of their first, third and fifth birthdays. We made the decision that he would work low-paying, part-time jobs so we could juggle our schedules and trade off child care. However, there was more than one time when I had to take a child to class with me because of schedule conflicts, and in those days, there were no electronics to help out.

As I got closer to graduation in 1979, we hoped that when I got a call, my husband could pursue his own profession. However, early in 1979, my synod bishop invited each of the synod's candidates to visit him in his office. Some of his first words to me were, "So where else would you like to serve?" When I responded, "So you are telling me that there are no calls available to me in this synod," he replied in the affirmative. Needless to say, I was shocked, knowing that our family's future depended on my getting a call. We were also living in a seminary apartment, so we had a very short time after graduation before we needed to move out.

In those days in the Lutheran Church in America, bishops from the northeastern synods would come to the seminary campus to interview students who were interested in calls outside their home synods. There was no assignment process. I made appointments with every bishop I could. I still remember the moment when Bishop Wilson Touhsaent of the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod reached across the table and touched my hand. "I will have a place for you," he said.

A few weeks later I was in a call process with Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Easton, Pennsylvania, to serve as its assistant pastor.

The senior pastor, the Rev. Glenn Neubauer, had served the congregation since the year I was born. Yet, that year he had already moved the congregation from the Service Book and Hymnal to Lutheran Book of Worship, just a year after it was published, and he was ready to add a woman pastor to his staff.

On the day of the election, I preached my sermon, and after the worship service, our family was led to a lounge to wait while the congregation voted. When our guide finally returned, we were escorted back to the nave, where we heard the positive results. Our middle child, Jarrod, who then was seven years old, looked up at me and asked, "Did we win?"

While many of my classmates disparaged assistant pastor positions, for me the four and a half years I spent at Good Shepherd were a blessing. Because I didn't have to focus on the administrative side of ministry, I was able to use my creativity to form a variety of study and sharing groups and to use some of my drama skills. I was also able to serve on three synod committees: church vocations and examining, which were combined into the candidacy committee in the ELCA, and the professional development committee, which provided continuing education and support for pastors, associates in ministry and deaconesses.

In 1983 Bishop Harold Weiss was elected to lead the synod. Shortly after his election, he invited me to lunch. By the end of 1983, I was one of the first three ordained women to serve on a synod staff and was excited to be the assistant to the bishop to relate to the committees on which I had served.

While I treasure the years I served with Bishop Weiss and the rest of the staff of the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod, in 1991 I felt called to return to parish ministry, specifically to serve a congregation that had experienced some conflict, St. Peter's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. The vote

was a close one because I was a woman and this was a congregation populated by many former steelworkers, and because there were those members who were suspicious of the synod staff. But on Feb. 1, 1992, I began serving as senior pastor, with a primarily female staff: two associates in ministry, the parish secretary, two musicians and a bookkeeper. The two “token” males were the visitation pastor and the custodian. What began as a tenuous call lasted for 20 years. I retired on June 30, 2012, and was named pastor emerita. Those were years of blessing and challenge, as I shared in ministry with an amazing staff and a wonderful congregation. Together we participated in a variety of city ministries; did campus ministry with Lehigh University students; raised over a million dollars to restore and remodel our buildings, which had experienced deferred maintenance in the midst of the conflict; became a Reconciling in Christ congregation; and welcomed 13 Horizon Interns: ten female and three male.

I share this journey because as I look back on my active ministry, I see the power of the Holy Spirit working through the people who were sent into my life and through the opportunities I was able to experience. Life was not always easy, but I constantly felt empowered to face the challenges and to move forward in the name of Christ. Over 40 years after my young son Jarrod asked, “Did we win?” I can truthfully answer, in celebration and thanksgiving, “Yes, Jarrod. We won.”

May the God of Miriam and Ruth and Esther and of Mary Magdalene and Priscilla and Phoebe bless you now and forever. Amen.

The Rev. Edith Benrud Roberts was ordained on June 3, 1979, and served as assistant pastor of Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Easton, Pennsylvania; assistant to the bishop of the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod, LCA and ELCA; and senior pastor of St. Peter’s Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

We Will Never Stop Marching in the Light of God



I’m sure everyone noticed: 2017 was a big year for Lutherans. You could not avoid celebrations commemorating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, even if you wanted to. Leading up to that year, the Lutheran World Federation advertised a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity: a special preaching contest for young pastors who were around the same age that Martin Luther was on Oct. 31, 1517. The winner of this contest would participate in the LWF assembly happening in May of 2017 in Windhoek, Namibia, and preach their sermon at the closing worship of this event. Information about this contest made its way through my women clergy networks, and we imagined how amazing it would be for a woman pastor to be in that pulpit in front of Lutherans from around the world.

When the preaching contest for the Lutheran World Federation Assembly went live in the fall of 2016, I sat in a coffee shop with a blank Word document and wondered what I had to offer. To have a woman preacher at that pulpit, I realized with a sinking feeling, meant that I needed also to offer myself — my gifts, my imagination, my voice — and put myself on the line, as so many inspiring women had done before me. I had to have some faith that God was calling a woman to do it, and that the woman might be me. After all, the worst that could happen is a few hours lost and a sermon not preached. Right? My sermon was written, sent off and promptly forgotten among my ministry’s many other concerns.

A new call in a new state and new beginnings filled my mind in the early part of 2017. Lent was about to start. Then, on the morning of Ash Wednesday, I woke up to an email in my in-box, informing me that I had been chosen in the 10 finalists of this preaching contest



I had completely forgotten about. I just about fell out of bed. Lent became a mixture of surprising preparations — filming a sermon segment to be submitted for worldwide voting, updating my passport, tentative plans for an international trip that might not happen. Fast forward to Maundy Thursday and the exciting news that I would be traveling to Namibia to meet thousands of Lutherans from around the world and preach the sermon I had written. I had only four weeks to prepare further with updated shots, pulpit supply searching, making travel arrangements and finding the most effective way to pack an alb for international travel.

During that week, I drank Ethiopian coffee prepared by members from the Makane Yesus church; met bishops, pastors and young leaders from around the world; spent four hours in worship in a soccer stadium with ten thousand Lutherans; survived amendments to amendments; and had a backstage pass to see the global Lutheran church at work. All before finally, at the end of the week, preaching during worship with all my newly met colleagues and being streamed online (before streaming worship had become as common as it is now).

One of the things I was most looking forward to about the global commemoration service was the chance to sing “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” — also known as the Lutheran Theme Song — with ten thousand Lutherans from around the world. I was anticipating an earth-shattering moment ... and I was absolutely disappointed. Somehow my section got completely lost, and we ended up singing the last verse twice. So much for a transcendent experience.

Except, I did have exactly the experience I was expecting ... at the end worship, when ten thousand Lutherans from all the world sang the South African hymn “We Are Marching in the Light of God.” It was a moment beyond time, beyond sight, beyond language or thought. In that moment, together, all countries and all colors and all genders and all voices together, we were the body of Christ. In that moment, I witnessed the kingdom of God on earth.

Had I known even half of what I encountered that week, I would have not felt worthy of the task, and I may not have tried. I could have listened to the voices of doubt. But instead, I listened to the many women pastors and mentors who nurtured me in my vocation, and let their voices carry my own. These voices seemed more important than ever, especially since once I arrived at that assembly of global Lutherans, I learned that almost a fifth of the member churches of the Lutheran World Federation still do not allow women to proclaim from the pulpit (including one — Latvia — that has rescinded the ordination of women).

As many wiser women before me have said, none of us would be here without women. Women paved the way for Jesus’ ministry with their feet, their money and their voices. Many along the way have tried to silence those voices, both then and now, by telling us we are not good enough or smart enough or tough enough to hack it out there in ministry. But we don’t listen. We won’t be silent. We’ll keep preaching and marching, ever forward.

When a woman proclaims the gospel, she puts herself on the line, so that little children can see the face of God through her and hear the love of God through her. When a woman proclaims the gospel, she breaks the stained-glass ceiling and pulls to freedom all

the women coming after her. When a woman proclaims the gospel, her words can live on in the mouths of other women preachers — and men preachers too. Every time a woman proclaims, she is affirming God’s desire to smash the patriarchy.

Someday the sun will rise on a Sunday morning with no more “firsts” to overcome, no more stained-glass ceilings to break. In the meantime, maybe my voice can carry the voices of my siblings in Christ who come after me, until that day does dawn.

May the reforming spirit of the living God sustain us so that we may witness together, march together, sing together, pray together, and proclaim freedom together while following in the footsteps of Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Pastor Lydia Posselt (ordained in 2012) is about to embark on yet another adventure in starting at Emmanuel Lutheran Church in Vienna, Virginia, as its associate pastor of evangelism and mission, accompanied by her husband, Josh Keiter, and their two cats. The couple are sustained by Jesus and their love of coffee.

Creating Something New



After four years as a clergy couple in the parish ministry of the American Lutheran Church, my spouse and I participated in Mennonite Voluntary Service in Denver, Colorado, from 1984 to 1986, in a little-known category as deployed rostered clergy to another denomination, through the advocacy of Bishop Wayne Weissenbuehler of the Rocky Mountain Synod, in order to learn the ins and outs of the remarkable program of MVS.

As a result, we cofounded the Urban Servant Corps, a year-long voluntary service program, while Lutheran Volunteer Corps was also forming on the East Coast at the same time. It was determined that I would be the director while my spouse took a call as a campus pastor. I served as director from 1987 to 1998. Those were incredibly rewarding years of ministry with absolutely wonderful, dedicated volunteers, many of whom went on to seminary.

The USC continues to be a ministry of the Rocky Mountain Synod, with a strong intentionality toward the volunteer’s intentional living setting as well as their year of service within a nonprofit in the community. A second volunteer program spun off from this one and created the Border Servant Corps in Las Cruces, New Mexico, also a ministry of the RMS.

The USC could not have gotten started without the support of the bishop and a grant from the ALC through Bruce Klitsky and the WheatRidge Foundation, as well as the many congregational members who found this a way for God’s work, our hands to have a very concrete impact in Denver. I take great joy in the number of alumni volunteers who are now in significant leadership roles in many of the organizations that the USC has served in partnership in Denver.

“Behold, I will do a new thing” (Isaiah 43:19 KJV). God, grant us the vision to embrace where you lead, to take us into new ministries with the support of one another on this incredible journey. Amen.

The Rev. Bonita Bock, ordained 1980, served American Lutheran Church, Baker, Montana, before becoming the founding director of the Urban Servant Corps. She served out her years of ministry as faculty of the religion department of Wartburg College and director of the Wartburg College West extension program of the college in Denver, Colorado, retiring in 2018.

A Little Story of a Curious Confirmation of Call



In the early summer of 1981 the district office (as judicatories were called in the American Lutheran Church) sent a 22-year-old seminarian to preach in a small church for the summer. A rural congregation in Ohio had fired its unhappy pastor. It needed Sunday coverage. That would be me.

Like most congregations this one had never seen a “jill-in-the-pulpit,” a female in a pastoral role. Already hurt and angry from the breakdown with their pastor, the members wanted someone dependable and competent, not an unknown female the same age as their daughters and granddaughters. Their initial misgivings showed in their chilly welcome and in the difficulty members had in making eye contact when I spoke to them.

The 50-60 people in attendance each Sunday were sturdy, hardworking folk. Most were in farming; most were of German extraction. These were not a people prone to providing affirmation or compliments. If something annoyed them, however, they would let you know.

Over the summer some of the faithful parishioners warmed a little. Some would even chat, but not the three men in the back row. Week after week these burly farmers sat silently in their crisp pastel sport shirts, arms folded, their faces scowling. They neither greeted me nor responded to my greetings. When worship was over they were the first out the door.

Gradually I discovered that their wives were among the women who all sat together near the front, the women who actually ran the place. Perhaps, I thought, the ‘Silent Three’ attended under protest, at the insistence of their wives. I hoped that accounted for their perpetual scowls and not the preaching of

a very young woman with a whopping half-credit preaching class under her belt.

Near the end of the summer, in August, one of the Silent Three came up to me and spoke.

“We’ve got something to say,” he announced. I strove to put on my best calm and open face as I turned to them, all gathered together at the foot of the aisle. Inwardly I turned to Jell-O, instantly convinced their scowls really had been about me. They must have hated every sermon; they were about to tell me I couldn’t preach my way out of a wet paper bag; they were about to say someone like me had no place in their church. I braced for everything except what happened next.

The biggest and burliest of the three spoke. “I’ve been thinking,” he said. The other two looked on and nodded. “My wife goes out in the field on a \$250,000 combine, and she don’t hurt it none. I can’t see that you are going to hurt that old pulpit either.”

Without another word they turned and went out the door. It was my turn to be speechless. I looked after them, flabbergasted, suddenly aware that they were speaking for the congregation. I was “in.” I had been accepted. I had just received the mightiest affirmation of vocation it was in their power to bestow. I blinked back tears as I turned to chat with the smiling women coming down the aisle.

Holy God, give us patience and hearts to hear as we discern our continuing vocations. Amen.

Ordained in 1984, Heather Hammond has had the privilege of serving in parishes large and small, in a synod office and now as a campus pastor.

Turning Some Heads



It was 1978. I was newly married, and my husband and I were both beginning our internships at different churches in and near a small city in northeastern Pennsylvania. A large percentage of the population was Roman Catholic. Several times we met for lunch wearing our collars, and as newlyweds we held hands as we walked to the restaurant. This turned more than a few heads as folks unfamiliar with female clergy and the rarity of a clergy couple would point and stare.

My favorite story from this early time of ministry happened as I visited at one of the Roman Catholic-sponsored hospitals. I was wearing my collar and dressed all in black, similar to a number of priests scurrying across the lobby. As I waited for the elevator a young janitor finished cleaning the spot he was working on and joined me in waiting for the elevator. He took a look at me and said, "Hello, Father." I smiled and gently shook my head, so he tried "Mother?" I shook my head again, and he guessed, "Uh ... Sister?" The elevator arrived, and we got on. As the doors closed, he shyly asked, "What are you?" I laughed to myself and explained that I was serving an internship as I was preparing for ordained ministry in the Lutheran church. As the doors opened, I left him scratching his head. It was the first of many such encounters during my internship and the years of ordained ministry that followed.

Gracious God, we give you thanks for those who have paved the way with good humor and joyful acceptance of the reactions of others. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Elizabeth Mitchell, native of Reading, Pennsylvania, was ordained in June 1980 and served as an assistant to the bishop of the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod as well as three parishes (including 29 years as co-pastor with her husband) until retirement in 2019.

The Parable of the Yeast



I could tell about the time a district president (bishop) sat across the table from me and said, "The ministry here is going down the toilet because you are in violation of Scripture." I was on internship in a campus ministry cosponsored by three Lutheran denominations, the American Lutheran Church (ALC), Lutheran Church in America (LCA) and Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS). It was 1975-'76, and the district president was from the Missouri Synod. It was not the first opposition I had faced. My field work (contextual ed) congregation had prohibited me from carrying a tray to pick up the empty communion cups after the pastors had distributed communion because a woman had never done that before. A woman had never carried a tray of empty cups? I could tell more about that; or what it was like to be one of three or four women among 600 (male) M.Div. students at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, in 1973, experiencing sexual harassment, as well as the deep joys of theological and practical learning; or what it was like to walk out of that seminary and establish Concordia Seminary in Exile (Seminex) — but I won't.

I could tell about what happened after I transferred to the ALC, finished seminary in St. Paul in 1978, and waited over six years for my first call. As far as I know, I held the waiting record in the ALC. During that time, when my husband's teaching contract put our family in a new district, an ALC district president declared that since he had not asked for me, he would take no responsibility for me. Or I could tell about the time halfway through my ordained ministry that angry parishioners called me a tool of the devil, or three-quarters through my ordained ministry when a (male) faculty colleague blocked my role as a community worship leader, or just three years before I retired, when a (male) pastoral colleague derided my joy in liturgy as "imperial claptrap."

I don't need to go into all that. Of course, it was and remains a struggle to transform unjust, violent structures that dehumanize women and other people.

“If the Lord had not been my help, my soul would soon have lived in the land of silence. When I thought, ‘My foot is slipping,’ your steadfast love, O Lord, held me up.”

—Psalm 94: 17-18

Let me tell instead about how the Spirit in steadfast love sustained me in those early years. People let me stay in their homes when we were expelled from seminary dormitories. A society supporting missionaries devised a way to pay for my contested campus ministry internship. A woman seminary classmate became a lifelong confidante and friend. Deployed district staff, considering my gifts, skills and availability, invited me into an interim ministry before my first call. Having children opened me to abundant life. Completing a master's degree in rhetoric helped clarify public aspects of my work. Local pastoral colleagues (male) paid for occasional preaching and part-time work (\$125 a month for coordinating Sunday school and adult education). In 1984, with initiative from another local pastor, I was ordained in a part-time call.

I will tell how the Spirit used ministering itself to bless me and keep me growing. I always thought I was here to bless others but found myself enlarged as well. Walking with people in all passages of their lives is a holy privilege. Weekly engagement with the word and sacraments keeps me turning and returning to springs of life. Preparing and leading worship was home and holy recreation. A campus ministry deaconess became a vital conversation partner for exploring — imbibing! — feminist and womanist theology. I grew into

contemplative prayer by hosting Taizé prayer around the cross every week for 13 years. I embraced spiritual direction, both receiving and offering it. I thrived on Godly Play. I studied Old Testament theology on sabbatical with Walter Brueggemann. I was deeply satisfied to teach regularly in the parish and occasionally in universities and seminaries; I especially enjoyed teaching preaching. With the Kaleidoscope Institute I developed trusted practices for nurturing diverse and sustainable communities. Above all, it was through ministry and ministry colleagues that I met my beloved partner in pastoral ministry and married life, John Beck.

I will tell that the Spirit used my ministering to bless others, thanks be to God! Here is just one testimony. In retirement, in fall 2020 during the pandemic, I attended via Zoom the Affirmation of Baptism service for two young people I had baptized as infants. Their grandmother reflected, “I was so glad to see that you were at the girls’ confirmation. You’ve been a part of our faith and spiritual journey for decades, though separated by space and time. Love and blessings.”

Love and blessings, indeed. “Women have been Spirit-filled leaders, healers, spiritual guides,” Elizabeth Johnson affirms. “Friends of God and prophets in their own right, they have known spiritual power coming to them from God out of the struggles of their own life. They have expressed this power in fights for self-worth, in wide and deep hospitality, in unremitting service with and to the poor, in struggles for justice, in tongues touched with fire that announce the Holy Spirit, in continuous assertive patterns of



compassionate ministry. They have also been consistently silenced, suppressed, abused by violence and unjustly killed. Telling of their defeat and accomplishment in the Spirit becomes a self-involving, performative, political and mystical narrative that God-seeking women today inhabit in the struggle for equal human dignity.”*

In all this, we live by the grace of the gospel of Jesus, the crucified One beloved of God, raised from death, present with us. Amen.

Pastor Joan L. Beck, baptized into Christ in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, confirmed in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, ordained in the American Lutheran Church on Sept. 30, 1984, is retired from ministry in the ELCA and lives in Portland, Oregon.

**Elizabeth A. Johnson, Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints (New York: Continuum, 1998), 174-5.*

The Call



Close to eight decades ago my vocational journey began. Devout Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod parents brought me to the baptismal font. They provided a Christian upbringing at home as well as in parochial schools. I was a bright, creative, curious child, catching a spirit of grace in a mostly conservative setting. Everyone thought I'd end up being a teacher or social worker, two professions that were acceptable for women with leadership gifts in the church. Even though 11 uncles and male cousins became pastors, there wasn't a clue that I would one day round out the discipleship dozen!

I remember the day I was ordained back home in Kewaunee, Wisconsin. A woman I knew in

grade school recalled a conversation we girls had about what we were going to be when we grew up. She said I told them that I was going to be a minister. Immediately they all countered, “Ladies can't be ministers!”

Throughout my life I have felt a call to serve, to study and share God's word. When my father died suddenly, I was 14 and faced with leaving the planned course — going on to become a Lutheran schoolteacher and probably marry a minister rather than become one! This family loss turned out to be the beginning of many faith-testing and promise-revealing events that, upon reflection, were calls leading up to the Call.

The Call came sometime in the early 1970s. I was married and the mother of two young children. By this time, I had gone to college and joined the American Lutheran Church with my husband. I became involved in many facets of church life — leadership in the ALC Women, evangelism, stewardship, youth, small-group and camping ministries. I was asked to lecture as well as preach. I participated in community activities focused on the environment and volunteerism. The women's movement and ordination of women in our church captured my attention. I began to realize the faith of my youth was but a stepping stone on a path shaped by the living word in service and ministry, community and lifelong learning.

One day I either stepped into or out of the shower and sensed this urgent message: ‘You know what you are to be — a Minister — it is not with a small ‘m.’ The vocational journey took a long and winding road, with detours, dead ends and divorce, with back burners, backpedaling and much grace. Through it all I knew in my heart and soul that God was going to gather it all together one day and settle me down in a place where I could be the person first set on course more than a half century ago.

My parents blessed me with a name that means “praised of God.” I have made many poor choices and weakly succumbed to easy solutions. I have not always done “praise of God” things. But by the grace of God and in the infinite wisdom and mercy of a loving heavenly Parent, forgiveness and new beginnings have always been granted.

After graduation from seminary, I went on to serve congregations in Iowa and Wisconsin. In each place, The Call summoned ever more humility, trust, service and gratitude. Latent gifts were dusted off, fresh ideas came abundantly and solid doctrine found reference. I am grateful for the energy and faith teachers, professors, colleagues, parishioners and children expended in bringing along this servant of Word and Sacrament in her call.

Although I may not sense the urgency of The Call I felt in the shower decades ago, I am still “walking wet” in a baptism-dampened vocation. I praise and thank God for my work supplying the pulpit, writing devotions, leading Bible study and providing caring ministry. In daily renewal and regeneration, in service of the Gospel and abiding in the Word, I’m still using gifts God showers on me in the Call. Praise God ... “the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (Romans 11:29).

Praise to you, O Lord! Calling each one by name, you set us on a journey of faith, active in service and ministry for Jesus’ sake. Come, Holy Spirit, lead gently and boldly the early and latecomers in living the Call. Bless sisters and brothers taking up their cross and following Christ. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Judy M. Deckert, Wartburg Theological Seminary, '98, lives in Kimberly, Wisconsin, where she enjoys rosemary, cooking and praising God for the next new thing in living out the Call.

“iObispa!”



I was still a rookie bishop. It was my first visit to a companion synod. And it was my first visit to Latin America. Bolivia had recently undergone vast changes. For the first time, an Indigenous leader had been elected president of this country of over 60% Indigenous peoples. Poor people were feeling the difference, with access to education and other services. In recognition of the numerous Indigenous groups in the country, Bolivia was named “a plurinational state,” and the multicolored flag of the Andean peoples was seen everywhere, along with the tricolor official national flag.

But for all the economic and social progress, Bolivia was still a Latin American country with an overwhelming Roman Catholic majority and a macho mindset. There were no ordained Lutheran women in Bolivia, and Bolivians had never set eyes on a Lutheran bishop who was a woman. I wondered how they would view me. The Spanish word for bishop is obispo. In Spanish, as in many languages, words have gender. Obispo is male. The Bolivian church does not use the term obispo for its leader. Instead the head of the church is Pastor Presidente. So what would they call me?

I needn't have worried. From the time the plane landed in El Alto at 14,000 feet until the plane took off from Santa Cruz (with a slight delay because of roadblocks, burning tires and civil disturbances), everyone called me “Obispa.” Obispa. The feminine of obispo. My Spanish teacher later told me, “It is not a word.” But they made it a word. Obispa. And so it was.

As a rookie bishop I didn't yet know that you have to be prepared for anything on a companion synod visit — preaching a much-longer-than-North-Americans-would-tolerate sermon on a moment's notice; dancing on a



stage; painting flowers on a tablecloth; attending a four-hour funeral. My surprise was that, as part of the church's 70th-anniversary celebration, I was invited to ordain the first two women to serve as full pastors in the Bolivian Evangelical Lutheran Church. I had ordained a fair number of people back home in the Montana Synod by then, but always in English. Someone provided me with a special services book in Spanish that I think was published by the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. We made it through the service of ordination with God's and the people's grace. I think it helped that Spanish was not their first language either.

One of the new pastors was an educator, running the school that the church ran for local children. The other worked in domestic violence prevention and response. The church was part of a national campaign against domestic violence, reimagining gender roles and challenging stereotypes. The willingness of these two women to step forward and be pioneers was an important event not only for the church but for the nation. I was humbled to have been a part of it and a little embarrassed by my fears ahead of time. These women were true firsts. They are leaders.

Twelve years later, a number of our Lutheran partner churches in Latin America have women as heads of churches. Thanks be to God.

**Go with the strength you have.
Go simply
lightly
gently
in search of Love.
And the Spirit go with you.***

Jessica Crist (ordained 1979) retired as bishop of the Montana Synod in 2019, and lives in Great Falls, Montana, with her husband, Turner Graybill. They are parents of 2 adult children, Rhiannon Graybill and Raphael Graybill.

**From In Spirit and in Truth: A Worship Book (World Council of Churches Seventh Assembly, 1991), p.29.*

Some of the Challenges of 1976



I was among the earliest of women to become a pastor. Because people had not been exposed to a female pastor before me, my story presents some of the fun and sad encounters that I had as people interacted with me. I seldom took offense, although offense could have been taken in some of the circumstances. People needed time to adjust to a female clergyperson in 1976.

In one of my congregations, a man asked, "So, what do we call you?" I answered playfully, saying, "You can call me anything except 'Ms.,'" a title I disliked. "You can even call me, 'Hey you!' and I'll respond." That parishioner did just that. "Hey you" was my title for about six months. Ever so gradually, respect was accorded.

In another instance, I attended a weekend retreat with my colleagues at a convent. I would be the only woman present other than the sisters of the convent. I entered the convent to register with three of my male colleagues. First, the sisters thought that I must be a secretary for the group, then they thought I must be one of their wives. When they found out that I was a participant, one of them, by now quite flustered, quickly left the registration desk to arrange for a bathroom and a cell room away

from the men's area for me. As we gathered for introductions, I was incorrectly introduced by one of my colleagues as "Shirley." I began to correct the individual, who quickly responded, "Surely, your name is Shirley." That colleague did not get my name correct for a year. The retreat went on without further conflict until evening, when some of us chose to enjoy the swimming pool. My colleagues didn't know if they could be "normal/rough" with a female as we played water polo. I found myself having to establish limits and correct perceptions time and time again in every arena of ministry. No one knew what was conventional or acceptable.

Other encounters happened on Sunday mornings after church. Because I served in a rural area, I asked one of my parishioners (a man who disliked female clergy) if I could ride with him in his corn picker during fall harvest one weekday. We did so, and the following Sunday, I went to the coffee hour to find myself greeted (across the length of the fellowship hall), "Well, good morning, Pastor, how are you?" He was never uncomfortable with me after that encounter. On the other hand, one of the women of that church came to me on my last Sunday to say, "You do a fine job in the pulpit, but it should be a man up there." There was no logic in her words, only resistance to change.

I treasured all of the fun and sad moments for the honesty and the integrity they brought to each moment and for the relationship of love and forgiveness needed and shared in Christ Jesus.

**The Lord bless and keep us as we grow and change,
The Lord smile on our missteps and successes,
The Lord watch over our entering, our serving and our retiring.**

Alice M.S. Horton was ordained on Reformation Sunday in 1982 as an intentional interim pastor, a role she served in for 18 of her 30 years of active ministry.

Grace, Unbidden



God's grace comes unbidden and in ways that we cannot orchestrate. When I was 7, a voice said to me, "You will do something special for God someday." I felt the warmth of the sun on my being while I kept skating down the sidewalk, wondering what that something special might be. Something deep happened within me — the awareness of my love story with God. Decades passed before I entered pastoral ministry, a calling that forged an even deeper relationship, although one that did not always come with clarity. Rather, this was a lesson in staying curious, staying open to the power of God.

Within the first few months of my ministry, one of our beloved parishioners was diagnosed with a brain tumor. A devoted husband and father of two, Jim went into the surgical room filled with hope that his recovery was within his reach. Unfortunately, his journey took an unexpected route, and after months of being in a vegetative state, he exhaled his last breath on earth and inhaled new life with God.

At his funeral, the pews began filling with people: congregational members on the right; Harley-Davidson chapter members on the left. Two seemingly disparate groups of people, each with a slightly different perspective about life. As various people spoke, the lines of demarcation faded, along with preconceived notions about "other," and the two groups created a new community, one that was gathered to celebrate one person's

life — someone who forever changed the landscape of God’s universe.

Within a year, Jim’s spouse found love again, and her heart was healing through this new relationship. Unfortunately, it was short-lived; Bill was diagnosed with lung cancer. When we gathered for his service, the sadness was palpable, but this time, the community found its strength in each other through the stories they shared and the prayers that were offered.

The last note of the final hymn sounded, and we all processed to the parking lot. The congregational members went to their cars; the Harleys began revving up one by one until the sound of the engines thundered to the heavens. There was a tap on my car window. “Pastor, we would be honored if you would ride with us.” I responded, “I am the one who is honored.”

Riding on the back of a Harley was one of the most unexpected and humbling experiences during my early ministry. I felt the warmth of the sun on my being as we proceeded to the cemetery. Assumptions, preconceived concepts about groups of people — how they are identified, stereotyped — faded for all of us in that sacred space we call the sanctuary. This was the place where people brought their raw grief, their vulnerabilities. This was the place where God’s healing grace was at work.

What I have learned throughout my ministry is to remain open to God’s guidance, God’s presence in the moments of quietude and in the most difficult challenges. We have moments where God can reshape, re-form us if we simply get out of the way to allow God’s love story to unfold naturally. A call to grace is an ongoing invitation that is sometimes unopened, but is always there.

Staying curious, staying open to receiving as well as using my gifts, has helped sustain my response to God’s call in ministry. For me,

ministry is meeting people where they are in the journey to provide a word of comfort as well as challenge. I would tell a young girl to stay open to God’s invitation and, when saying “yes,” to realize that she has help along her path. God’s grace comes unbidden, and there are times when it is sorely needed. Ministry is demanding and calls us to get into the very messiness of life. There are times to also step back and marvel at the goodness of what God does in this world — to feel a touch of grace.


God’s blessings are abundant. As you rise in the morning, listen to the whisper of God’s grace. As you move, feel the warmth of the sun in and on your being. As you rest each night, rest in the goodness of God’s grace.

Rev. Ruth Lesher — Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, ’92.

**“Wife of Baptist Minister
Ordained by Lutherans.
Details at 11:00!”**



When I read Bible stories of Jesus calling disciples, they glowed on the page. I wanted to serve Jesus too. In confirmation, Pastor said girls couldn’t be pastors. Jesus only called males. I entered Muhlenberg College in 1968, studying to become a French and German teacher; was active in Christian activities; and got engaged to a Lutheran pre-theological student. In 1970, ordination opened to women. Home for the summer, I struggled with the call. One Saturday night, praying, I “laid out a fleece for the Lord,” asking for a sign as Gideon had (Judges 6:36-40). The first person who spoke on Sunday morning should tell me what to do! I got up alone and took a bus to church. The driver said nothing. I entered and met



our pastor, who said, “Did you see what I am preaching about today? The ordination of women!” I wept as he preached, “The Holy Spirit blows where it wills. You hear the sound of it, but you cannot know where it is going. The church repents of telling the Spirit what to do. When the Spirit calls you, you must answer!” My family was bemused. My boyfriend seemed threatened, and we soon broke up. But my Mennonite grandmother took me to meet Pastor Martha Kriebel, the first woman graduate of Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, serving with her husband in Palm, Pennsylvania. Talking with a woman in a collar about her role helped immensely.

I registered with the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod, Lutheran Church in America, and inquired about enrolling at Philadelphia Seminary. President John Newpher invited me to a prospective students’ weekend. “You and the other woman will stay at my home, as we have no accommodations for women.” I wrote back that I would consider attending when it did. My Greek professor suggested Princeton Seminary. They had women, and many Lutherans on the faculty. I entered Princeton in 1972. At an orientation retreat, a classmate asked why I was at seminary. I said, “To be a pastor!” He laughed and said I could marry a classmate and then a pastor could say his wife was his assistant. I laughed and said, “Sure, unless I were the senior pastor!” He laughed and said, “That’s what I like! A girl with a sense of humor!” I got elected president of my class and attended faculty meetings, discovering that Princeton Seminary had more students of color than women. There was a lot of sexism, and there were many, including some faculty, who thought women shouldn’t pursue ordination, but I felt serene.

I met my husband, Roy, in a funny way. My first year at Princeton, Roy was studying at the Ecumenical Institute of the World Council of Churches in Switzerland. Friends had asked him to write them in French, and I translated his letters! Middler year, he was back. We had classes together and started dating, and the rest of that story is 45 wonderful years of ecumenism in married life! Roy became general secretary of the American Baptist Churches USA (equivalent to presiding bishop), served as chair of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA and had a busy travel schedule. Three times bishops asked me to be their assistant, but I always had to decline. Who would take our sons to worship and Sunday School?

We married in 1975 during my internship at St. James, Coopersburg, Pennsylvania. The synod’s first woman intern, I was placed with the head of the church vocations committee. It was a fulfilling year. I was approved for ordination at the 1976 Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod Assembly. Ed Ehlers, bishop of the New Jersey Synod, appointed me to serve St. Bartholomew and Grace Lutheran Churches, Trenton, during their pastoral vacancy. He gave the call committee three names. They interviewed the men and asked for more names. He insisted they interview me and met with them. “What if she gets pregnant?” “Can we charge the Baptist Church rent if her Baptist-pastor husband lives in their parsonage?”

Finally, the call committee met with me. After some conversation, I said to them, “What concerns might someone have that would make them feel not ready to call a woman?” Over strong resistance, I started listing concerns, until we had a lengthy list, then talked about each item. I was amazed when a male doctor on the committee actually asked me what birth control I used and no one objected to

the question! My mind raced. If I objected that they would never have asked that question of a male, I feared that they would classify me as a bra-burning feminist. So I answered calmly, resisting the temptation to end with “And you?” Then the women jumped on him, objecting that nobody asks that question of teachers — they take maternity leaves and return! But they had let him ask the question to see how I answered! An interesting night!

The call committee approved me. I used the same process with the councils. They voted affirmatively. Both congregational meetings went well, and I received over 80% of the combined vote, a resounding success at that time. I was ordained June 23, 1976, surprisingly, the first woman in the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod of the LCA, the 38th woman in the Lutheran Church in America and the 50th in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The news that night was “Wife of Baptist minister ordained by Lutherans, details at 11!”

Full acceptance took time. At St. Bartholomew, I was in a restroom stall when choir ladies entered, saying, “Well, our church is really going to go downhill now. Couldn’t even get a man!” Another said, “But our services are still very nice!” I stayed in the stall, smiling, until they left. They called many women pastors after me. At Grace, a choir member sent me a note: “On Sundays I thought, ‘That’s our woman pastor, preaching.’ Today I thought, ‘That’s our pastor.’ I just wanted to let you know that today, that happened for me!” I’m grateful to those who advocated for women pastors and to the saints of Grace and St. Bartholomew, who first took that leap of faith.

Holy Spirit, stir up your power within and among us, that we might all recognize the gifts you have abundantly given us for the sake of the church and its ministry in this world that God loves so much. When

recognizing those gifts and the call to use them in unfamiliar ways, or when challenging places pushes us beyond our comfort zone and causes us to be afraid, bless us with those who will give courage with encouragement and send us signs to confirm our faith that God is continually doing new things, possibly even in and through us, through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Patricia Stauffer Medley was the first woman ordained by the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod of the Lutheran Church in America, on June 23, 1976, and formerly was sometimes called the “first lady” of the American Baptist Churches USA.

Great Aunt Emma: A Nazarene and a Role Model



When I think of women pastors, the first person that comes to mind is my Great Aunt Emma Irick. She was a pastor, evangelist and missionary in the Church of the Nazarene. I grew up in the Church of the Nazarene and never gave a thought to becoming a pastor, much less a Lutheran pastor. I also thought that ordaining women was a no-brainer. The Church of the Nazarene ordained Emma Irick in 1920, claiming the holiness stance: you cannot limit the Holy Spirit and who she might call to ministry.

I was in elementary school when my Great Aunt Emma came to our church in San Benito, Texas, to hold a revival. The revival would go from Sunday night for a whole week of evening meetings with an out-of-town evangelist, and sometimes they brought their own team with a special singer and musician. Aunt Emma was not the first, nor the last, evangelist to come and hold a revival at our church. It was a regular happening for us, at least once a year, if not

more. Once I even snuck out of the house and walked into town to attend a revival service at the Methodist church. My parents didn't know I was gone until I got dropped off at home by a kind neighbor!

Aunt Emma, to me, was a big woman with a very strong voice and a preaching style of the old school: seriously loud, boisterous and damning. I was sure to answer every altar call to go down to the mourners' bench and pray through to the victory — every night. And I was destined to be a missionary nurse in Africa — or another scary place where I'd have to eat horrible insects or go hungry. Great Aunt Emma would assure the crowd that God is a jealous God and wants all of us to serve him in some terribly self-sacrificing way.

Great Aunt Emma was my one and only role model of a female preacher/pastor/evangelist. Knowing her normalized the female role in church leadership for me. The only people I knew who didn't have female pastors were the Catholics in town. At that time, probably the Baptists didn't ordain women either, but it was the Catholics we were taught were surely going to hell for praying to the Virgin Mary and otherwise not believing in holiness perfection as we did.

I didn't become a missionary nurse — a typically female role that would have satisfied my parents, my church and my sense of duty. The role of missionary nurse was typically fulfilled by females, and it seemed the thing to do for an easily influenced church geek, which I was/am. When I felt the call to go to seminary, my current pastor (a male) advised me to become a diaconal minister because, according to him, "It will fit you better and not require as much education." My pastor encouraged me to attend seminary but maybe cut back on my dreams or expectations. I was also about 56 years old. So it may have been an ageism influence on his advice, rather

than gender. I'll never be sure, but I'll give him the benefit of the doubt.

To me, it was very clear that my call was for full-time ministry of Word and Sacrament, but I did check the box for diaconal ministry on my entry paperwork in the call process, taking his advice. Fortunately, our seminary chaplain was helpful in listening to and helping me to change my track at seminary — no issues of gender or age seemed to influence his advice. Thank God for seminary chaplains!

Someday, I hope we won't have to qualify the word "pastor" with "male" or "female," "gay" or "straight," "Brown/Black" or "white." I think that is why I am reluctant to join in the memories and stories — in order to play down the differences and deal with the day-to-day work — as a female pastor. However, I have found wonderful solidarity and support from other women pastors. Also, I have discovered some similarities in the way we've been treated by councils, church members and strangers.

When I am in one of those situations of direct confrontation, my sense of humor sort of takes over, and there is a potential for trouble! One gentleman came into the church during the week to see the pastor. I greeted him in the narthex. He handed me a card about women being silent in the church or some such. I thanked him for his interest and showed him the door. When I walked back into the secretary's office, I told her I'd really missed an opportunity. I said I should have told that guy it was OK that I'm a female pastor because I'm gay! I thought that was hilarious, but she gave me that look.

There were probably other times when I've experienced prejudice against my being a



pastor, but I usually ignore it and keep on keeping on. I don't confront the issue head-on; I just deal as best I can. I'm not a campaigner or protester type. But if they ever decided not to ordain women in the ELCA, I'd have to find another denomination. I'd vote with my feet. Maybe I'm a lot like my Great Aunt Emma, who never made a big deal about being a female pastor — she just did what she knew God had called her to do and pastored Lufkin First Church of the Nazarene in Lufkin, Texas, for about 40 years. What a role model!

Pastor Marcia Shumate-Schultz, Our Savior's Lutheran Church, Edmore, Michigan.

Dancing with Miriam, Wrestling with God




When I graduated from the University of Minnesota, I had no clear idea as to where the Holy Spirit was leading me. Then I saw an ad in the campus ministry newsletter asking for volunteers to go to New Guinea to teach. Immediately I saw that as an invitation to go there for two years and figure out where God might be calling me. After two very good years in New Guinea I served as a campus minister in Bemidji, and at the University of Minnesota. While there I took several classes at Luther Seminary and talked with pastors and teachers in the American Lutheran Church's youth department to help me in the discerning process. One pastor suggested that I look at Bible stories and suggested that I find ones I identified with, ingest them and see where that might lead. The two stories I chose were Miriam dancing with the women after crossing the Red Sea and Jacob wrestling with God and leaving with a limp. These two stories have guided me throughout my life, giving me joy, the ability to dance and the courage to

struggle with God, having the limp to remind me that the struggle is part of growth but not the final word.

My ordination took place on Oct. 12, 1975. This is such a short, simple statement, yet it was preceded by centuries of men and women, laity and clergy praying for and anticipating the full participation of women in the church. During the 1950s and '60s men and women were excited about the possibility of ordaining women, and many bright and committed women began serving on national boards and wrote books justifying the biblical role of women in all areas of the church. Groups of women met regularly as they advocated for the full participation of all women in the church. At the same time theologians and bishops were writing and speaking out in their parishes and at their synod committees, encouraging them to appoint women to important positions. Clergy invited women to preach, seminaries invited women to study and campus ministry continued its long history of calling women as lay ministers.

Two days after my ordination I was driving across the country on my way to Alaska. After years of questioning, I was experiencing great joy, as my call was confirmed by the congregation in Anchorage and I was ready to serve as one of their pastors. When I met the congregation for the first time they beamed with joy, celebrating that they had trusted God in the calling of a female pastor. The youth and young adults were extremely supportive, and the women sent a delegation to let me know they expected "in-depth" Bible studies. Again we celebrated when the bishop came to install me. He introduced me by stating that I was a definite but not difficult feminist. Attending the installation was a young St. Olaf graduate who had grown up in Anchorage as a Roman Catholic. Later she wrote in her diary, "I, for the first time, experienced benediction. I personally felt blessed. Not by her but by



an infinitely tender God. I had a glimpse of the priesthood for the first time. 'Wow!' I thought, 'Is this what men experience all the time?'" She became a regular participant in worship, often playing her flute, and she attended and participated fully in the women's retreat.

During this time the city of Anchorage was working on new ordinances, and the one on open housing specifically included sexual orientation.

A group from the community began to campaign against the inclusion clause, using biblical references to support their position. I was a part of an ecumenical group of clergy who wrote a response stating there were many ways to interpret Scripture and we believed we were called to love God, self and neighbor. Several times I invited the senior pastor to join our discussions, and each time he declined, not wanting to talk about it. Our letter, which identified the congregations and pastors, was sent to the mayor, and he released it to the press. My pastor was furious. He told me he'd received very angry phone calls, and the next Sunday in his sermon he said he knew gay and lesbian people, he had been in their bars and he knew they could change. As a new pastor I became embroiled in a church and community conflict. My joy in ministry quickly turned to despair as I was informed that "a number of people" were going to ask for my resignation at the annual meeting, which was to take place in two weeks.

No longer was I dancing with Miriam; I was wrestling with God. How could my call to this parish, which felt so right, fall apart so quickly? I was in trouble and in the wilderness. Yet I did not doubt my call and thought I would

continue my journey elsewhere. The meeting was on my birthday, and I had asked some of the young adults to attend to support me. The first half of the meeting dealt with committee reports and the budget. We adjourned for coffee, and I assumed the request for my resignation would come after the break. During the break a number of women came out of the kitchen with a huge cake, singing "Happy Birthday to You." Whether the women sabotaged the intent of some or it was only a rumor, I do not know. But later, after the meeting, one of the members came to me and said, "I am not straight, and I never thought I would come out during a congregational meeting, but I was prepared to do so."

As I reflect on my life I am overwhelmed by the love and support I have received. I continue to walk with a limp, as I have entered the wilderness many times wrestling with God. And Miriam patiently waits for me to join in her dance.

Gracious God, as we continue in your service, limping and dancing, give us the courage to grow as we learn, to question and to explore ways to respond to the needs of this broken and beautiful world.

Ordained in 1975, Mary Hannah Rowe served parishes in Anchorage, Alaska, Whittier, California, and Alameda, California. She was campus pastor for Purdue University, director for the western region for ELCA campus ministry and an interim pastor in Berkeley and Oakland, California.



The Quiet and Profound Honor to Serve



What do you want to be when you grow up? I recall the Saturday morning my mother asked me that question. The response had always been doctor, lawyer, police officer. Only, that Saturday, I added “pastor.” My mother listened, intrigued by this new addition to her 13-year-old’s list, and asked, “Do we have female pastors?” “Not yet,” I said, “but I think by the time I get older we will.” About a year later the American Lutheran Church opened the doors.

Growing up in Southern California, I found the church’s tradition to be shallow, and I faced little if any discrimination in my local congregation. When it came to serving as an acolyte, as a worship assistant or in any other capacity, my pastors were just thankful for the help and never sought one gender over another. I was the first member to attend seminary, and the church celebrated its support of me by paying my tuition. I had no reason to think that this was not every woman’s experience. When I started at Wartburg Seminary in 1978, it was like landing on a different planet. I heard stories of women who were never allowed in the nave of their church, never allowed to be a lector, acolyte or council member, and whose duties were limited to those of Altar Guild member or Sunday school teacher. Women who had been forced to resign from their home congregations before attending seminary.

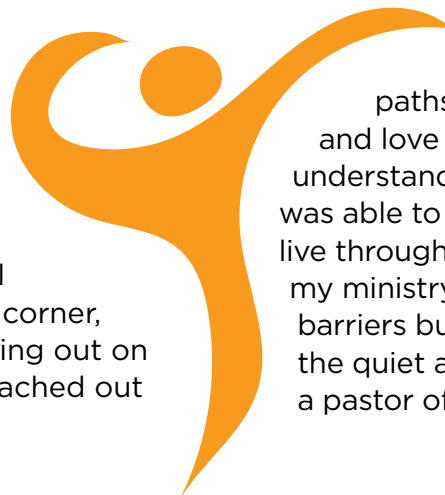
This was all new to me, and in my ignorance I thought surely this discrimination was only part of our past. Seminary graduation from Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in 1982 was around the corner, and graduating students were going out on call interviews. A senior pastor reached out

to me to set up an interview for an associate position. Two weeks later I received a letter from him that read: “I presented your name to the call committee, but they informed me the congregation is not yet ready for a pastor of the fairer sex. Too bad, because I always liked girls better than boys.” A few months later I had an interview at a large congregation in Nevada. I was asked how I would dress at work; would I wear a bra? Many similar questions were asked over the two years I waited for my first call. Then something happened: The chairperson of a call committee drove me to the airport after an interview and said, “I have to tell you something. I am totally against women pastors; the only reason I agreed to take your name is that the bishop said he would not give us anymore names until we interviewed a woman. And now, I really like you and I don’t know what we are going to do.” A week later they issued me my first of five calls.

Over the years there were many similar experiences and stories of women serving on the West Coast. I have many clergy women friends who struggled to get a full-time call, second call or third call, or who were paid at levels far lower than their male colleagues. I am one of a few women ordained in the early years in California — 1984 — who have never been without a full-time call throughout their years of ordained service. I am both grateful and saddened by that, as I know many other women who have faced far greater discrimination

than I. Many of those women found the challenges too great and pursued other occupational

paths. It was because of the support and love of my colleagues and bishops, their understanding and collective wisdom, that I was able to work through those early years and live through a time of change. Now, as I recall my ministry, my reflections rest not on the barriers but rather on the opportunities and the quiet and profound honor it is to serve as a pastor of this church.



Now I reflect on:

- the senior women who have whispered in my ear how much they wanted to be a pastor but weren't allowed, and how proud they are to tell people they have a woman pastor;
- the young girls who dressed up like me to play church at home;
- the young boys who are growing up in an inclusive congregation, expecting that to be the norm;
- the colleagues, both women and men/clergy and lay, who have held and supported me, who have struggled, changed, celebrated and grieved with me;
- the change I have been part of, sometimes painfully and sometimes joyfully, to reach this day of ordination celebration; and
- the parishioners who, on their deathbeds, confess their sins and allow me the honor of blessing them with the words of God's grace.

I will never forget such a blessing I received — Charlie was his name. A simple gallbladder surgery had gone awry and was too much for his elderly body. As his wife and I stood at his bedside, I led us through the Service of Commendation of the Dying. He confessed his sins, I pronounced the absolution, we took Holy Communion and together we prayed the Lord's Prayer. Charlie was so weak at that point he was just able to mouth the words "Our Father, who art in heaven" I then shared the benediction: "May the Lord bless you, Charlie, and keep you, may the Lord's face shine on you and be gracious unto you,

and may you, Charlie, dwell in the house of the Lord forever." I made the sign of the cross on his forehead, and Charlie mouthed an "Amen." closed his eyes and died.

Thank you, Charlie, and all the other thousands of Charlies, because I am so blessed and honored to have served as a pastor ... as your pastor, in this church of ours.


The Rev. Dr. Synde Manion was ordained June 17, 1984 and served calls in California from Trinity Lutheran Church of Hemet; Lutheran Social Services of Northern California; Resurrection Lutheran Church, Redondo Beach; St. Luke Lutheran Church, Woodland Hills; and the Southwest California Synod Council, among others. She also served a call to institutional ministry as a psychologist for the state of California.

No Toxic Church Behavior Can Negate God's Call



It was a typical gray Seattle Sunday as I stood in front of the congregation, proclaiming the love of God shining in our lives. Suddenly the sun broke through the clouds, into the windows, brightening the sanctuary, stirring an audible gasp and a flood of giggles. I couldn't tell you anything more specific about the moment, but I can remember the first time I recognized these God-moments occurring to me.

Worship at Zion Lutheran of Avalon Park, on the South Side of Chicago, was the highlight of my week in those days. I loved my life and work as a theater professional, but Zion was home. I met the love of my life there, we were married there, our most loving and supportive friends were there, our children were baptized there, and I was called into pastoral ministry



there. It was a Sunday after worship. At the prompting of Dr. Harold Vogelaar, I had written a short skit about an interfaith perspective on Good Friday in Jerusalem. I was feeling pleased by the performance and the congregation's response.

As folks left the sanctuary for the fellowship hall, I stood in the center aisle. Harold approached me.

“So, when are you going to seminary?” he said, before being quickly pulled away into another conversation. I remained silent, standing there, alone in the center aisle of the church, feeling a glow of light surround me. As with Saul on the road to Damascus, the moment was more of a catalyst than a revelation. It took a few months and a few more conversations, but that was the moment I realized God speaks to me through people, and on that day, it was Harold. Over the years, I learned to recognize those God-moments, both in retrospect and, eventually, as they happened.

I began seminary as the daughter-in-law of Velma Austin, who had made her mark as a lay leader in the Metropolitan Chicago Synod, in youth ministry circles, as a member of the synod council and as a leader on numerous committees. Carrying Velma's name opened some doors for me along the way, but I wasn't sure what value it would have when I had to tell my professor that I couldn't arrange for childcare during class. My kiddos were just three and four years old, but they were already accustomed to entertaining themselves quietly during tech rehearsals, so with confidence in their capacity to be on best behavior, I made the ask. The Rev. Dr. Albert “Pete” Pero was team-teaching the theology of Martin Luther King Jr. with the then-president of the seminary, the Rev. Dr. James Echols. I told

Pete of my situation and assured him that I and my children would sit quietly in the back corner of the classroom, so as to ensure they were not a disruption. He smiled broadly and agreed to the plan. The next week, I arrived to class a few minutes early, to introduce the children and get them settled in our corner. As we entered the room, Pete was in front of the room, smiling broadly.

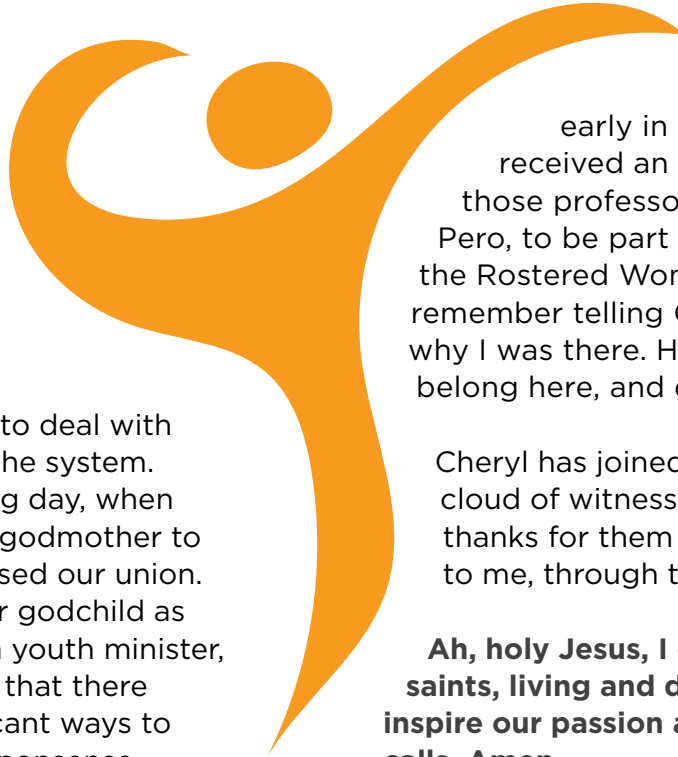
“Welcome, children!” he chuckled. “Come on up here. You are going to help me teach the class today!” There, on the table next to his podium, were puzzles, coloring books and crayons, and in that glowing God-moment, I heard the message that I wasn't going to have to sacrifice my children in the midst of this journey.

The hard thing about these God-moments is that others don't always see them the same way. Prior to seminary, my experience with the ELCA was limited to two congregations that loved me dearly, supported me, affirmed me and cared for me. But seminary began my encounters with the more hurtful aspects of the church, especially as a multicultural woman of color. As Pete welcomed my children to the front of the room, some of my classmates were less than thrilled. The scowling looks at my beautiful brown babies and the sideways glances toward me told me that some folks didn't think I, or my children, belonged there. There were other microaggressions such as not being able to identify with more than one ethnic-specific club at a time and being told that I should just quit my job (which provided my family's housing) to do field education. There were also the macro-aggressions, like literally being screamed at by a professor just outside our classroom and having those classmates read that



behavior as permission to do the same inside the classroom.

As my years in seminary continued, my understanding of the God-moments in retrospect gave me the encouragement I needed to deal with all the ways I didn't fit in the system. I remembered my wedding day, when the Rev. Beverly Conway, godmother to my spouse, Anthony, blessed our union. Beverly claimed me as her godchild as well and nurtured me as a youth minister, continually reminding me that there were no small or insignificant ways to serve God. Her fierce, no-nonsense spirit fueled me to endure the overt and covert racism of seminary. She reminded me to connect with the professors of color on campus, and in those relationships, I found the encouragement and strategic guidance to understand that no toxic church behavior could negate God's call.



Years later, as I was early in my second call, I received an invitation from one of those professors, the Rev. Dr. Cheryl Pero, to be part of the steering team for the Rostered Women of Color project. I remember telling Cheryl that I had no idea why I was there. Her response: "Girl, you belong here, and don't you forget it."

Cheryl has joined Pete and Beverly in the cloud of witnesses that surround us. I give thanks for them and for God still speaking to me, through them.

Ah, holy Jesus, I give you thanks for your saints, living and dead, who guide our lives, inspire our passion and encourage us in our calls. Amen.

The Rev. Priscilla Paris-Austin (she/her), parent of three amazing humans in partnership with her spouse of 23-plus years, was ordained in 2011 and lives her call to justice and liberating love as pastor of Immanuel Lutheran Church, Seattle, Washington.

Snapshots of 33 Years of Ordained Ministry



I have been blessed to be a woman pastor for the last 33 years. Some snapshots:

I grew up as a PK (pastor's kid) and started Gustavus Adolphus College in the nursing program. God slowly led me to major in psychology and minor in religion. As I started seminary, I still wasn't sure if I was going to be ordained or get an M.A. I decided to do a year of internship, and that was when God's call in my life dovetailed with the gifts that God had given me and that I was using at my internship church.

When I was ordained, the only clergy shirts that were available were from the companies that had made men's clergy shirts for decades. They sold the same shirts to women but with darts in the chest area.

On my internship, at a Catholic hospital as I was visiting a member while wearing a clergy shirt, a nurse chased me down the hall, calling, "Father! Father!" to get my attention!

At my first Christmas sermon I was eight-and-a-half months pregnant. I sat in a rocking chair and shared the Christmas story from Mary's point of view; I even used the word "placenta," which not many men pastors probably ever have!

As I began leading a wedding decades ago, a little girl sitting in a front pew said loudly: "THAT'S the priest?"

My husband, Luther, and I are a clergy couple and have served together in the same three parishes. On our first Sunday in our first call, an older gentleman looked me up and down and said, "So ... you're little Luther." I thought of many different responses I could use, but sought to graciously reply, "No, I'm Lori. What's your name?" (I should add that his wife heard him, was embarrassed and slapped him on his arm.)

Luther and I were both part-time (sharing a one-and-one-quarter position) as we raised our three children. One Easter morning, between services, I needed to express my breast milk for our newest baby. I remember thinking to myself as I did so, "My pastor dad never did THIS!"

There were many challenges for us as a clergy couple, and still are, but the joys outweigh them.

Throughout my ministry, I have sought to follow God's call to preach and teach the gospel, and have not put being a woman in front of that calling.

When I was talking after church one Sunday with a member whose mother had died in another state just days before, one of our toddlers kept pulling on my skirt, trying to get my attention, and finally pulled my skirt down! Thankfully I had a slip on!

Throughout our ministry, we have sought to put our family first, even if that meant we were not able to be at meetings or needed to reschedule, so we could be at our kids' concerts and games. A grateful member once shared: "You both were good role models to us as parents, to make sure to be there for our children."

I am thankful for countless women and men from our congregations who have supported, encouraged and respected me in my ministry.

As I look back over the 33 years, I am grateful for congregations that supported our ministry as a clergy couple as well as my ministry as a woman pastor. There have been countless God-blessed interactions: sharing Jesus' love during worship, preaching, doing baptisms, presiding at communion, shedding tears at funerals, supporting others through their sorrow in a grief group, tender hospital and hospice visits, officiating at weddings, listening to sisters and brothers in Christ share their hard journeys and offering prayer together, and forcing myself to write my council reports and annual reports.

As these strange and troubling months of the worldwide pandemic continue, and as churches worship apart virtually, I can safely say that the changes and challenges of 2020 are far more exhausting and discouraging than anything I've faced as a woman pastor.

As I get nearer to retirement, I am grateful for the life I've had as a "woman pastor" and hope for the day when "woman" doesn't have to go before the noun of "pastor." Even though at each of the three churches we've served I was the first woman pastor they've had, I am thankful for the women who went before me in the 70s and early 80s and paved the way.

"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

Living Lord, thank you for the gift of being the church together on this earth. Even with our vast differences, unite us in your love. Strengthen church workers everywhere in these unsettling months of the worldwide pandemic, and may we, as your people, stay faithful to you. Raise up new leaders for

ordained and lay ministry. May your Spirit flow mightily in and around our country and world. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Pastor Lori E. (Bergstrand) Swenson graduated from Luther Seminary in May 1987 and was ordained June 21, 1987.

A Parable in Jerusalem



“Go and sit up there,” the Benedictine priest says, “and take him with you.” I get up from my seat on the floor and go.

In 2001, I had been ordained for 20 years and was pastor of the English-speaking congregation of the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in the Old City of Jerusalem during the Second Intifada (the renewed violent conflict between Israel and the Palestinians). In response to a particularly harsh series of actions, the Jerusalem Heads of Churches decided to sponsor two weeks of ecumenical prayers for peace. Each evening, Christians gathered in a different church in the city to pray. It was an opportunity for Christians in the Holy City to come together to give thanks for the presence of Christ among them and to seek God’s guidance and help during that difficult period.

I appreciated this decision to pray together. I appreciated the invitation to join with traditions less familiar to me, particularly the Orthodox Christian churches. I appreciated the many languages, the varieties of sacred spaces and the litany for peace repeated each evening, written by our Lutheran bishop of Jerusalem and the Holy Land, Munib Younan. I appreciated the simple hospitality that followed the prayers and the fact that praying together was exactly what we needed to do at that time.

Yet my position as an ordained member of the Jerusalem clergy — who was Protestant, foreign and female — was never clear in these gatherings. Nor had it been spelled out when I joined in the formalized processions and customary visits back and forth,

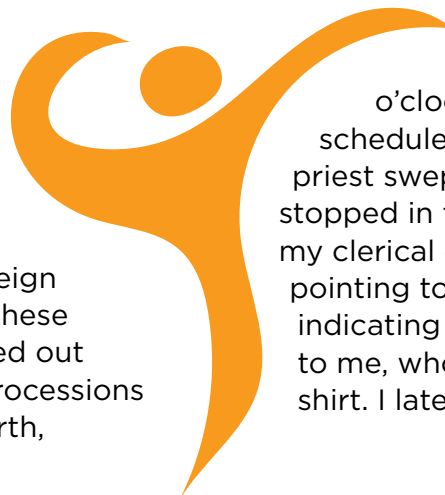
bringing greetings on various holy days to the headquarters of the 13 traditionally recognized churches, of which the Lutheran church was one. I was the first female pastor serving a parish in Jerusalem and was neither fish nor fowl. I was, instead, the elephant in the room, courteously received but with my differences never directly acknowledged or discussed.

On the other hand, what was very clear was the lower position of women, whether lay or religious, in all of these churches. And coming into that reality night after night during these special ecumenical prayers for peace was beginning to wear on my spirit.

I was musing on these things — well, to be honest, I was bitterly going over these things — when I arrived at the Benedictine Abbey of the Dormition for that evening’s prayers. The prayers were well-attended throughout the two weeks, and, although I was early, I couldn’t find a seat. So, I settled myself on the raised floor of a little side chapel, alongside several other people. Behind the altar, the men in black assembled in the apse — the patriarchs, bishops, priests, monks — assuming their places of honor, never questioning that these seats belonged to them.

In the side chapel, I was alternately nursing my resentment and earnestly praying somehow still to have a heart open enough to participate in these prayers that I knew were so necessary for me and for us all.

A few minutes before six o’clock, when the prayers were scheduled to begin, a Dormition Abbey priest swept through the congregation. He stopped in front of me, seated on the floor in my clerical collar, and said, “Go sit up there,” pointing to the apse, “and take him with you,” indicating the man sitting on the floor next to me, who was wearing a purple clergy shirt. I later learned that that purple-shirted





worshiper was a visiting Anglican bishop from Canada, another person who didn't know quite where he fit into this constellation of Jerusalem church hierarchy.

"Jesus told a parable about this, and I've just entered it," I remember thinking as I walked forward and was ushered to a seat just to the right of the abbot's throne, a position that gave me a wondrous view of the large mosaic of the Virgin Mary hovering above us, the only other woman also seated in the apse that night. Yet I was overcome by the feeling that not only had that visiting male bishop come with me but — more significantly — all of the women I now saw before me, along with everything they carried in their hearts.

"What happened in there? That was amazing!" We'd gathered in the courtyard for refreshments following the service, and I listened to the witness of many women who had accompanied me that evening to a place of honor. And I prayed a blessing on that hospitable — and brave — priest.

Not only does Luke give us the parable of being brought up to the place of honor (Luke 14:7-12), but early in Luke's Gospel we hear a similar message from the lips of Mary, not the gilded, enthroned Mary safely frozen on the ceiling above an altar in Jerusalem but a flesh-and-blood, pregnant, adolescent Mary who has understood that her trouble will be her blessing and who sings to God,

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for [God] has looked with favor on the lowliness of [God's] servant ...

[and] done great things for me. ... [God] has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. [God] has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; [God] has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

—Luke 1:46-53

That evening in Jerusalem, I learned something from the hospitality of a Benedictine priest who disarmed my resentment and made me face myself when he invited me to move from the floor to the place of honor. I learned that one is not really humbled by being brought low, disregarded, devalued or humiliated. One is truly humbled by being given a place of honor and knowing that it is undeserved. In other words, one is humbled by grace, undeserved, unearned, by receiving hospitality offered freely, without regard for a return invitation or repayment of any kind.

Gracious One, show us how to disarm and lift up the lowly in the presence of the mighty. Bless those who bring that gift into ministry, those who bravely and simply take action in your name on behalf of all the saints. Amen.

Susan P. Thomas was ordained to Word and Sacrament in 1981 in the Lutheran Church in America. In addition to her time in Jerusalem, she has served congregations in New Hope, Minnesota, and Vienna, Austria, as well as campus and congregational ministries at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Harvard and Dartmouth. Many of these pastorates she shared with her husband, Michael.



Who Said Girls Can't?



My path to ordination at the age of 40 was nontraditional in every possible way but always guided by a deep, restless, often unspoken call to serve the Lord and a determination to never give up.

As a girl born and raised in South Africa, I came from a family deeply ingrained with the Pentecostal faith. Looking up to relatives who were dynamic and highly regarded pastors, and especially hearing stories about my paternal grandfather, who was the national director of missions for the Apostolic Faith Mission Church, I so wanted his legacy to be my own — but that mantle of position and possibility passed only from father to son, both in philosophy and in actual practice. My first “girls can’t ...”

I was later sent to a Catholic high school, where my worldview expanded and the realization grew that my girlhood faith was not the only way to serve the Lord, yet “girls can’t ...” was again a constant refrain.

With a direct route to the ministry blocked on all sides, I gained a college degree in physical therapy, which was to me a way to serve

God with hands and heart by helping people to improve their health. During these years, as a young adult, I was also very active in my Pentecostal church and was even “allowed” to teach the adult Sunday school class, a great honor bestowed by a pastor who saw and understood my desire to serve but who had no provision to make a way for me.

I was privileged to serve on the youth council but never on the church

council, a position reserved only for men — “girls can’t ...” once again.

I eventually began attending a nondenominational church, where I learned that the related Bible college was accepting new students. In a move that could only have been guided by the Holy Spirit, I boldly went to see the dean of the college — without an appointment or introduction of any sort — and, on the spot, convinced him to accept me into the program. Following two years of successful study, I was ordained as a “co-pastor” with my pastor husband because, again “girls can’t ...” serve as a pastor apart from their husbands. Single women completing the course of study could only be ordained as missionaries, because “girls can’t ...”

After 12 years of mission field work, our family, now including two little girls, moved to the United States, where I became active in a Lutheran church in Miami. Although mission work was challenging and satisfying in many ways, I still did not feel as if I were truly doing God’s work for my life. As I pondered this, my pastor in Miami encouraged me to use my background and past experiences to consider ordination as an ELCA Lutheran pastor.

Taking a deep breath, I looked into the “alternate route” program at the Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary in Columbia, S.C. For the first time in my life, there was no “girls can’t ...” thrown at me from the outset, only a mandate to prove that I was worthy of acceptance and capable of doing the work that lay ahead. When facing the admissions panel of 12 esteemed theologians, I could only think, “God has brought me this far; if this is truly of God and truly intended to be my future, then I





have nothing to fear” — of course, I had to give my knocking knees that same pep talk at the time!

Once accepted, I spent a reading year with a mentor and a resident “Lutheran Year” at seminary. Once ordained, I finally knew that the Holy Spirit had led me to the place where I could fully use my gifts. Following an internship, my first call as an associate pastor led me to Emmaus Lutheran Church in Orange City, Florida, followed by a 15-year call in Ocala, Florida, where I met the challenge of consolidating three congregations at various stages of change in their ministries. By this time, I’d long since left behind the “girls can’t ...” messages that had not only frustrated me but also inspired me to keep forging ahead.

Content in Ocala that I was where I needed to be to serve God’s precious people, I found that the Holy Spirit again had a different idea: when called for an interview at Mandarin Lutheran Church in Jacksonville, Florida, where I serve today, I came close to turning down the call committee’s request but again was drawn to entertain the opportunity. When I arrived for the interview, I thought, “Nothing ventured, nothing gained,” and that the worst case would be a gracious parting when both parties recognized a lack of fit. However, as I drove home, I knew profoundly in my spirit that “this was IT!” I felt in my heart of hearts that it was God’s will for me to be at Mandarin Lutheran at this time.

The freedom of working with a new congregation the past two years to discern how we would carry forward its ministry felt like being presented with a blank journal page on which I could write whatever I was

led to. Where we are today, even with the unprecedented challenges of the past year, makes me grateful for the open minds and hearts that have come on this journey with me.

Today, the most joyous thing in my life, comparable only to the joy of my first call following ordination, is the joy of knowing I am doing exactly what God has called me to do and in the place where God called me to be. My path to 20 years as a Lutheran pastor was anything but straight and carefree. I look back and think of each of those “girls can’t ...” messages as covering me in the same way an oyster creates a beautiful pearl from an unrelenting irritant. They served only to embolden me and give me the strength to persevere against all odds. The little South African girl in this story is living her lifelong dream of serving the Lord — and is a living testament that “girls CAN.” Don’t ever let anyone tell you otherwise!


Lord, so many voices tell us we are not good enough, but you say we are. Help us to hear your voice of love above all the noises of the world. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Ordained on Sept. 10, 2000, Anna Figueiro was finally able to fulfill more than a dream — her call to be a pastor, serving God and God’s people. What a privilege!

Created in God’s Image



From the time I was very young, I was taught that I was made in the image of God. However, all the images that I saw of God were male ... the pictures of Jesus, images of the guy with a beard on a cloud, the male pastor, etc. When I was 31, I joined a Lutheran church for the first time.



I was delighted that it had just called a female pastor as its associate pastor. As I observed Pastor Elaine LePoris in the pulpit week after week, I began, for the first time, to experience myself as truly made in the image of God. Unfortunately, the senior pastor had issues with women in authority, and within three years Pastor Elaine left our congregation without a call. She struggled to find another call, which took several years.

Ten years later, as I sat in church, I experienced a call from God to serve in ministry. At the time, I was a computer consultant and couldn't really imagine myself as a pastor. (As a young girl, I had aspired to be a church secretary — the highest calling I could imagine as a female.) I began researching ways to be in ministry for God. I looked into installing church software, something I was well qualified to do, but that didn't seem right. I explored diaconal ministry ... a very new ministry of the ELCA at that time. I was told that diaconal ministers would need to find/create their own position, typically as a parish nurse, church musician or Christian education director. For a single mom of two small children, that didn't seem like a possibility either. As I was pondering what God was calling me to become, I reached out to my former pastor, Pastor Elaine. Her wisdom helped me through the discernment process.

Finally, I attended a "Visit Trinity" weekend at Trinity Lutheran Seminary at Capital University, Columbus, Ohio. I cried the entire weekend because I knew in my bones that I needed to be there. I also knew that if I moved to Columbus, 150 miles from my home in Akron, I would lose custody of my children. I worked with the seminary and managed to attend classes

while commuting from Akron two to three days per week. I was able to be both a mother and a seminary student, but it took a lot of time and effort to arrive there. I was told that I was the first student to complete the program at Trinity while commuting from outside the community. Their idea of commuting was a student who lived off campus.

After I had been a pastor for 12 years, I was invited to be the field work supervisor for a bright young woman who was a student at Trinity. It was a great delight to supervise Kristina and to offer her a variety of experiences (for example, serving a multipoint rural/urban collaboration of four churches and dealing with the disclosure that one of the organists had a prior misdemeanor sexual offense). We settled into a rhythm of meeting for long lunches on Friday, exploring the issues that pastors face in ministry. When Kristina was ordained, I was delighted to pass on to her a stole that had belonged to Pastor Elaine and was passed on to me after Elaine's untimely death from lymphoma. I think Elaine would be delighted to learn that she is a grandmother in ministry.

May you delight in discovering the ways in which you are made in the image of God. May you rejoice in bringing the light of God's love into the world. Amen.

Dee Emmert was ordained Aug. 25, 2001, and served Trinity Lutheran Church, Norton, Ohio; Hope Lutheran Parish (Emmanuel, St. Mark's, Messiah, and Trinity Lutheran churches), Trumbull County, Ohio; and God's Grace Lutheran Parish (St. John's, Redemption, and St. Petri-Hope Lutheran churches), Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. After retirement, Pastor Dee serves as an interim pastor at Lutheran Church of the Cross, Sacramento, California. She is the mother of two sons.

“Take the Risk. It’s worth every penny and every minute of time.”



A late bloomer to the stage of women ordained to ministry in the ELCA, I entered seminary at the age of 60, and I graduated 25 years ago. There were many reasons for the delay in accepting the call to ministry, among them the matter of self-confidence. I was raised in an era of “girls should be seen but not heard” — at home, at school and even somewhat in church.

A lifelong Lutheran, I belonged to a home parish that enlightened and encouraged my faith, and I felt a commitment and passion to Christian service from confirmation days. However, there were also words of discouragement from home, and I always felt the need to prove myself — not good enough — so I continued my life serving in lay capacities.

After our two children were out of school and I was working at the Division for Global Mission (ELCA), the Holy Spirit was at me again. I participated in a seminary class offered at the churchwide organization, and my professor asked me at quarter’s end if I would consider ordained ministry. WOW! That threw me for a loop. When he heard my negative answer, he asked, “Why not?”

That’s when the discussions began with my husband, who was wholly supportive. After much prayer, I (we) made the commitment, and I became a commuter student, and I am so glad that I did.

My advice to women today — take the risk, it’s worth every penny and every minute of time. If I had it to do over again, I would have accepted the Spirit’s nudge earlier in my life.

I am now 88 years old, and I live in a seniors independent living community. Until a year ago I supply-preached in my area and have been blessed to be involved with Turkish Muslim immigrants in interfaith/intercultural programs. I have also chaired the spiritual life committee in my community.

To God be the glory.

(The Rev.) Vivian J. Becker

Faith in the Key of Music



On the third Sunday of Advent in 1982, there was only one entry on my calendar: “Christmas Oratorio.” I was in my third year in the Bach Choir of Christ Church, Mannheim, Germany, having advanced through children’s and youth choirs to join the adult choir just before my 16th birthday. Singing had shaped my life, and my faith, and my mind: fugues and counterpoints, harmonies and dissonances colored the words of ancient texts and prayers that had been set to music. Taking part in the sound created by 100 singers was the experience that anchored my adolescence.

Our choir master had come to Mannheim after his predecessor committed suicide. I had been in his children’s choir back then and still remember a woman we’d never seen before standing before us and saying, “*Kantor Kroll ist tot. Ihr habt keine Probe heute mittag. Geht nach Hause.*” (“Cantor Kroll is dead. There’s no rehearsal this afternoon. Go home.”) And after more than a year of supply cantors, fill-ins and canceled rehearsals, finally, a new cantor was to be there with us for the long haul.

In character he was the polar opposite of his predecessor: joyful instead of brooding, encouraging instead of scolding. But his



expectation for us to do our best was equal to his predecessor's. It's just that, now, singing was fun.

And so I, who didn't have the best track record of sticking with things, ordered my life around choir rehearsals. The adult Bach Concert Choir had always been my goal, and five months before my 16th birthday, I was finally allowed to join its rehearsals. By December of 1982, I felt I knew what I was doing. Until the phone rang one day, just around noon.

With the concert that afternoon, we had had no worship responsibilities that morning. But the phone call brought news of another death: Dekan Bender had died the night before. It was such a punch that I was at a loss for words. He had been my confirmation pastor, the first one to engage my questioning faith with honesty and candor and knowledge. "What are we to make of a creation story that talks about seven days of creation, as though all things that came to be could have come about in a week?" I had challenged him. "Do you know that there is another creation story?" he replied. "One that doesn't give you time frames, and a whole different sequence of events? What do you think it means that the Bible — word of God! — let those two stories stand next to each other?" I gulped. No one had ever taken my faith questions that seriously. And I tried to think my way through the implications of what he was saying.

Just after my confirmation, he was elected dekan ("dean") of Mannheim and had to leave Christ Church, as he had been called to oversee and coordinate all the Protestant clergy in Mannheim. And now he was dead from an aneurism, and we were supposed to

sing the Christmas Oratorio that afternoon. Jauchzet? Frohloeket? I looked out the window into the bleak December day and tried to feel my way through it.

Our choir master had asked us to sing if we could. The orchestra was booked, 750 tickets had been sold and the concert couldn't be canceled. He said he would understand if we couldn't, but he'd designate it a memorial concert and ask for no applause at the end. I showered, dressed and showed up. "You are a chorister," I told myself. "This is what you do."

Ten years later, I was packing to attend my mother's 60th birthday party as she called in the middle of the night. By then I was the vicar at St. Timothy Lutheran Church in Naperville, Illinois, having just received approval for ordination. "Something terrible has happened," she said. "Bring your black clothes." One of the teenage sons of the choirmaster had freed a woman trapped in her car after an accident on the autobahn, and in the November dark, a car had hit and killed them both. For eight hours, between Chicago and Frankfurt, Mozart's "Requiem" was playing on my Walkman, and when I emerged in Frankfurt I had to remind myself that the purpose for my trip was my mother's 60th birthday.

Three days later, the fall concert for Bach Choir Mannheim was scheduled: Brahms' "Deutsches Requiem." Once again, the orchestra was booked, tickets had been sold and the concert couldn't be canceled, though at least, this time, the music was more in sync with the prevailing emotions. And as ten years earlier, the choir showed up. Shell-shocked but present, it allowed the disciplined performance of music to create the web we could all let ourselves fall into, with our grief and



our questions all expressed in harmony and counterpoint, in dissonances and redeeming Picardy thirds. Both these men shaped my faith far beyond anything imaginable. Soli Deo Gloria, indeed.

For the gift of music, and for all who find their way to you through it, thanks be to you, O God. May our prayers come before you in melody and song, in harmony and lament, whenever words fail us. Amen.

Stephanie Kopsch is an intentional interim pastor in the Rocky Mountain Synod, having been ordained in 1993.

Global Companions

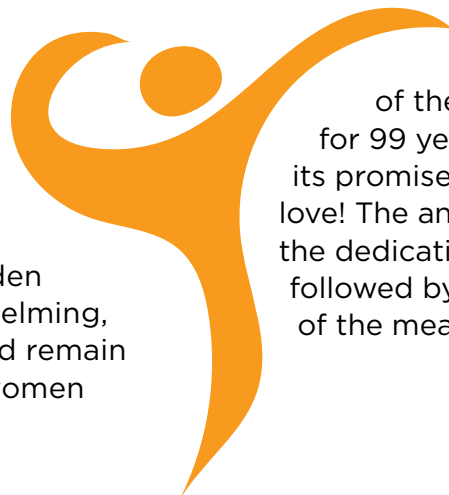


In 2003, I led a delegation of five from the Upstate New York Synod to represent the ELCA at the 100th anniversary celebration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe (ELCZ), our companion synod. It was my first journey to Africa and made a lasting and joyful impression.

The landscape was unfamiliar — baobab trees, elephants, giraffes, zebras, hyenas and the Southern Cross in the night sky — but when we visited the graves of missionaries and sang “Children of the Heavenly Father,” in four-part harmony and in five different languages simultaneously, we knew we were family. Zimbabwe was in its third year of a drought, yet the hospitality offered to us, along with visitors from Sweden and southern Africa, was overwhelming, and the friendships we developed remain priceless. There were ordained women

pastors in Zimbabwe, but they were excited to meet one who served as bishop and who had been a pastor for 25 years. People had walked for days to attend the centennial celebration, where I was privileged to serve communion at an outdoor worship service of 8,000 that lasted for hours. We saw the cost of runaway inflation, spending 6,500 Zim dollars for a bottle of Coke. Yet we experienced generosity beyond compare when our hosts invested six months of their meager salaries so that we could sleep on brand new sheets. We met home health care workers and AIDS orphans in Mnene and Manama, and learned the difference that our mission dollars were making as well as how much more was needed. In Zezani they gifted me with the honorific “Mama Bishop” and a hand-carved walking stick that bespoke my status as an elder and leader in their midst (rare for a woman).

The poems on the next page capture some of my experience. Shurugwi was a congregation originally founded in 1903 by Swedish missionaries. When the mission pastor’s wife, Esther Hellden, died of malaria, the mission was abandoned with the promise that someday the church would return to help organize a congregation. The headmen of the village guarded Esther’s grave for 99 years, before the church fulfilled its promise — what a picture of steadfast love! The anniversary festivities began with the dedication of their new church building, followed by a church supper that was typical of the meals we shared.



“Song of Shurugwi”

We sat like sardines in a tin can
On the bench seats in the rear of the Land Rover
Facing each other alternating knees
Trying to soften the impact of the terrain on our bodies
As we traveled deep into the bush for the first time
The percussion of the hardpack
Dashboard road rattled our bones
The longest bumpiest ride of our lives

We were only four hours late
Nearly on time in rural Africa
We could tell that Shurugwi was near
When the air itself seemed to pulse with life
We could sense the singing
Before we could really hear it
The sound crescendoed, drew us in
Beckoned us to come closer and closer still

They had waited all day, the faithful women
aligned in their distinctive purple and gray
Their hands kept time with the drum
They moved in perfect harmony
Hearts, voices, bodies joined in praise
Clouds of dust rising from their feet
They sang of long journeys and safe travel
Inviting the guests to join the dance

The words were in a native tongue
We had no ability to understand
Yet the music enveloped us
Engaged and entered us
Welcome only begins to describe how it felt
To greet these sisters and brothers in this unknown land
We had traveled so far
And what we found was home

Scripture says, “Give thanks in all circumstances”
(1 Thessalonians 5:18).

In this year of the COVID-19 pandemic, racial injustice and political unrest, I recall my experience in Africa. These people knew AIDS, malaria, unemployment, poverty and an unresponsive government beyond anything I have known, yet their songs, dances and offerings proclaimed their faith in a God of grace and demonstrated the meaning of living with hope in the face of fear and suffering. What an inspiration!

A Memorable Feast

*They called it soup
Thin tasty broth
Bits of vegetables
Gristly mystery meat
Served over rice
A large bowl of sadza
The local version of cornmeal
Scooped out of the communal
Bowl with fingers
Hot tea, milk and sugar*

*A meager meal
By American standards
Plenty to fill the belly
Fuel for a day*

*After a three-year drought
It was the very best
They could offer
All they had
Shared generously
Even to slaughtering
Their last goat
A holy feast
With strangers
From a distant land.*



Oh Lord Jesus, you invite us to give thanks in all circumstances. Open our minds and hearts to your unexpected gifts of grace and fill us all — women and men, old and young, rich and poor, Black, Brown and white, your church, and your world — with the power of your Holy Spirit, that we might live lives that glorify your name. Amen.

The Rev. Marie C. Jerge, ordained in 1978, is serving as a spiritual director and writing poetry after 40 years of active ministry as a pastor, assistant to the bishop, and bishop (the sixth woman in the ELCA to hold that position), all in upstate New York, where she resides with her husband, Jim.

Women Can Be Pastors!



“Women can’t be pastors!”

That is what I believed and heard. Men were pastors and women were secretaries, nurses and teachers. That is the message I grew up with and what I believed even when I started seminary to become a teacher of religion. However, 25 years after my ordination, when my daughter was ordained, women were wanted as associate pastors. The norm today is that women are senior pastors and bishops.

When I think back on my journey to ordained ministry, it was a third grade Sunday school teacher who got me interested in becoming a teacher of religion. Apparently, I was anemic, as I had many colds. My teacher told the class that I had so many colds because of all my sins. Surprisingly, God used this experience for good. It got me thinking theologically and asking a lot of questions of my Sunday school teachers and pastors. Was God punishing me for my sins? This same teacher told me

that someday I would make a good pastor’s wife. When I graduated from college, I did the expected and married a seminarian preparing for ministry in the United Church of Christ. I chose marriage over teaching German in a local high school.

Marriage meant moving to the campus of Hartford Seminary in Hartford, Connecticut, where I took classes and received a Master’s Degree in Christian education. It was in the 1960s, and the New Testament professor, who was Lutheran, wanted to make me a test case in the Lutheran church by seeking ordination. Instead we started our family.

I did not see women as pastors, nor did my parents. My mother was a nurse and became the first certified nursing home administrator where she worked, and my sister was a teacher who became a college professor. Neither stayed in traditional roles. Yet, when I enrolled at Luther Seminary in St. Paul in 1975, my mother questioned my decision and our son didn’t want his friends to know. Fortunately, my sister and husband were supportive.

Attending classes at seminary changed my life. I was welcomed and appreciated for who I was. I was not someone’s sister, daughter, wife or mother. The professors, all male at that time, were both encouraging and affirming. One professor hired me to read papers looking for sexist language. These same professors encouraged me to pursue ordination since the American Lutheran Church was ordaining women. They told me I would be more in demand and paid more. However, when I was approved for call in 1979, I was told that I would not get a call to a congregation in the Twin Cities but maybe to a rural congregation that could not afford a male pastor.

Before we had bishops, we had district presidents in the ALC, and my president accidentally signed two letters of call for me,



both in the Twin Cities and within easy driving distance from our home. Two signed calls were unheard of in that day. What do I do?

It got me on my knees praying to God. I told God, OK, I got it, you are calling me to be a pastor, but now which congregation are you calling me to serve? The answer came when I returned my unsigned letter of call to the senior pastor, who said he was keeping it for 48 hours before giving it to the call committee because he thought I was making a mistake. He sowed seeds of doubt in my mind.

I brought my signed letter of acceptance with me to worship at the other church. This was the congregation where some of my seminary professors were members and had given my name to the call committee. How could I not accept this call? As I sat there, I had second thoughts, as I didn't see myself serving there. The senior pastor had asked me in my interview if I cried easily. It did not seem he was ready for a woman associate. Just as, 17 years later, in 1996, some members of a congregation were not ready for a woman senior pastor. A petition circulated saying it was not right to have a woman supervising a male associate pastor.

I accepted the call to Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd in Minneapolis, a two-year-term call that could be renewed indefinitely if it worked out. It more than worked out. I loved every aspect of ministry and felt loved by the people. I accepted that call, not sure women should be pastors and left eight years later knowing that women were called to be pastors. I was ready, with the formation of the ELCA in 1988, to be called to serve as an assistant to

Bishop Lowell Erdahl, in the Saint Paul Area Synod, working with the call process.

Women can be pastors. The Holy Spirit has always called women to proclaim the good news. I am grateful now that there are more and more opportunities for women to serve and thrive in called and ordained ministries.

Prayer from the Lutheran Book of Worship: Lord God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Marilyn Breckinridge was ordained in 1979 and served as an associate pastor, an assistant to a bishop, a senior pastor and an interim pastor, including serving in synod companion churches in Tanzania and a short interim position at the International Church in Vilnius, Lithuania.

Women's Ordination Anniversary Story



In 2002, after I had been ordained 22 years, I was serving in parish ministry in my 10th year at Trinity Lutheran Church in Danville, Pennsylvania. During the previous few years I had been privileged to supervise five interns from the Gettysburg Seminary. Our most recent intern was Beth George (who continues in parish ministry to this day).

A member of the congregation had died and, following a meaningful, well-attended funeral

in the church sanctuary, the funeral procession of cars was being led through the streets by the hearse to the cemetery for the committal. I was in the front seat of a sedan with the funeral director, Dean, and Beth was in the back seat. As he drove us in the slow-moving line of cars, Dean gave me the Clergy Record card. I handed it back to Beth and explained that on it was the relevant information about the deceased for us to be able to enter into the official Parish Record Book. It was her first funeral. "Notice that it says 'Clergy Record' on the card. These things used to say 'Clergyman's Record,' but they changed it to make it gender-inclusive."

Dean laughed softly and said, "Yes, we changed that almost ten years ago after we got a letter from someone telling us it needed to be updated since there were now women pastors."

"Oh, yeah?" I responded. "Who was that?"

Dean then laughed loudly as he said, "It was you!" I laughed. Beth laughed. Dean laughed some more, especially since I did not remember writing to him.

But it was certain that I had, since, during my two decades of ministry, I regularly, gently for the most part, had to point out that it was a new age where both men *and* women were pastors.

The Gideons International, the group that places Bibles in hotel rooms, would write to me inviting me and my *wife* to a dinner. So off would go a letter from me telling them that I

had no wife but did have a husband. I believe that, after a few years, they finally changed the language of their annual invitation.

I would, on a number of occasions, receive letters for the Church Council that included the salutation "Gentlemen." So off would go a letter each time telling them that I was not a gentleman, nor were the women on the Church Council who served alongside of the men. I always would offer alternative forms of salutation such as "Ladies and Gentlemen" or simply "Dear Members of the Church Council."

My husband was once invited to a retreat for the spouses of pastors. We were pleased that, as a Lutheran retreat, the organizers had recognized that there were male spouses as well as female. However, he was asked to bring along a piece of fabric that would be included in the quilt they would be working on. I did not bother with a letter on that one as I dearly did not want to hurt the feelings of the women who had planned the retreat. My husband chose not to attend, needless to say. He was one of just three male spouses in my synod at that time.

I had learned that certain responsibilities were mine as one of the first female Lutheran pastors in the United States. (There were about 200 of us in 1980, when I was ordained in the Lutheran Church in America.) It had not really been my plan to be a pioneer. Yet, following God's call had made me one.

My letters, along with likely similar ones from my clergy sisters around the country, did over time begin to make a difference in the small towns, suburbs and cities in which we ministered.

I am most pleased with the impact that my presence had on children. One Sunday morning, 30 years into my ordination, when

I was serving St. Michael Lutheran Church in Wellington, Florida, the bishop was visiting our congregation. The bishop was a man. A little boy of about age 8 saw him walk by wearing his identifying collar, and the child immediately placed his hands on his hips and looked up at me with great joy on his face. "Pastor Margie, do you mean boys can be pastors, too?"

"Yes, indeed, they can, Ethan. Maybe when you grow up God just might ask you to be one, too."

That is one of my favorite memories, a lovely God moment that warms my heart each time I think of it.

Mothering God, thank you for using our society in the 1960s to help change the church. Your Spirit led them to recognize that women were worthy not only to respond to the call to serve as pastors but to be honored with the stamp of approval by the church at large. For this blessing that has transformed our denomination of Christians, we give you great praise. Amen.

*The Rev. Marjorie Weiss, ordained in 1980, is the author of the award-winning memoir *Praying on Empty: A Female Pastor's Story*.*

"Remember that you are a child of God, chosen and blessed for this journey."



While I was the Lutheran campus pastor at South Dakota School of Mines and Technology (SDSMT) in Rapid City, South Dakota, the students that were involved in the campus ministry would volunteer at Woyatan Lutheran Church, where I also was the pastor-developer,

and they would assist in worship that was held in the Lakota language and English, help with preparation of food for the homeless, and help with the maintenance of the property.

It was a joy to see the students and the worshipers of Woyatan come together in ministry and to grow in the gospel and grace of God. These experiences were rich in experiences and in living out the gospel of Christ. The worshipers at Woyatan were ex-offenders who were reentering the community after serving their time in prison, and they were reconnecting with life and their spirituality, getting to know Jesus Christ. Their problems and addictions still existed, but the SDSMT students and Woyatan people walked alongside of them and the many challenges that were presented.

The richness of being the campus pastor at SDSMT and the pastor-developer was a rewarding and challenging experience for a new ELCA Native American woman pastor and one that I will always cherish.

My formation as a pastor began in my early years as a child with parents who were very active in Holy Cross Episcopal Church, Pine Ridge, S.D. My role models of faith were the Native American Episcopal priests, Native American Episcopal deaconesses, the laypeople in the church, and my parents and family. As a divorced mom I was welcomed by an ELCA pastor on my home reservation and Episcopal priests at my home church to assist them in many ministry outreaches to the people as well as to an ELCA pastor in another South Dakota town. They encouraged me to study at seminary and become ordained, which I did. They all provided





guidance to me as I traveled that gospel and Luther road to ordination.

I would encourage women and girls who have known God's call to them to not give up on achieving it, to have a small group of supporters that will walk with you through all of the challenges and discernment. You will know when the path and choice are the right ones for you to make. Don't lose your personal voice, and have the courage to speak and to speak up. Don't let yourself be intimidated by politics or people. Remember that you are a child of God that God blessed and chose for this journey.

Then, as a Native American Alaska Native woman, I would say the same but add: never lose your culture, tribal identity, stories, songs or ceremonies. They are gifts from our God and Creator that we share with the wider church and many faiths. Be proud of who you are, who your people are and where you came from — your family, ancestors and communities — but be able to walk in both worlds, the white church world and our Native Indian tribal worlds.

Women pastors were second place to their counterparts and they still are, but our voices are rising and our presence in the church is stronger. Our leadership is finally being acknowledged as more than window dressing. Together we have and will continue to have strong gospel voices.

Joan Conroy is a pastor and the president of the American Indian and Alaska Native Lutheran Association.



The Times They Are A-changin'

Come gather 'round,
people
Wherever you roam
And admit that the waters
Around you have grown
And accept it that soon
You'll be drenched to the bone
If your time to you is worth savin'
And you better start swimmin'
Or you'll sink like a stone
For the times they are a-changin'

—Bob Dylan

Dylan recalls writing the song as a deliberate attempt to create an anthem of change for the moment. He wrote and recorded the song just a month before President John F. Kennedy was assassinated on Nov. 22, 1963.

The year 2020 has been more change than I would have ever imagined, but it has provided an interesting backdrop as I reflect on a few of the changes that 50 years of ordination of women has engendered.

On that June day, 1970, I was present for the historic vote of the Lutheran Church in America, not to ordain women but to change language from "man" to "person," and with that linguistic change the path of change began. As we left the session, two men, unaware of my presence, said, "Well, we did it, but it'll take 25 years before they will serve anywhere but hospitals or campus ministry

settings.” Little did he know that, 10 years later, women would be serving as parish pastors, seminary faculty and institutional chaplains as well as churchwide staff.

My life too changed unexpectedly when Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago invited me to join the faculty in 1971 as the first woman serving. I would be the only woman serving on any Lutheran faculty in North America. Suddenly the ordination of women took on a new life as I became a mentor for our women students and a spokesperson in congregations, synods and ecumenical groups. Because women at other seminaries had no full-time faculty in the early 70s, I had the opportunity to work with the Lutheran women students across the church, especially through the formation of the Lutheran Women’s Interseminary Conferences.

Seminaries across the church faced change sometimes with joy and anticipation and sometimes kicking and screaming. In retrospect it is fun to think of the issue that bathrooms could initiate with the rising number of women on campus.

Faculty were certainly not used to being called out for their sexist language or for studies that excluded women in the Bible, church history or theology.


Women will certainly remember how difficult it was for a small group of women to gather for lunch and have multiple male students or faculty pass by with some comment such as, “Wonder what they are plotting now.”

It also was a time of joy as male students and faculty relished the insights of new voices.

The women asked different questions; they wanted to explore all aspects of this God who is both father and mother. Even though it seems to still be in transition, inclusive human and theological language reminds us of how fast the world and times were changing.

On Nov. 14, 1976, in the church of my baptism, First Lutheran Church of Norfolk, Norfolk, Virginia, I took that final step to become a pastor in the Lutheran Church in America — the first woman to be ordained by the Virginia Synod. What a blessing it has been to serve this church — to preach, preside, offer communion, baptize, marry and walk with seminary students, congregations and people of all ages in a new way, and the list goes on, as God has led me through 59 years of serving in newly established missions as well as long-established congregations, LCA staff, a seminary and the Virginia Synod. Yes, these have personally been years of change because I started serving full-time in the church not on the date of my ordination but 15 years prior, with my first position after college in 1961.

Dress was an early issue for women pastors. The church supply store said there were too few women to make it economically feasible to design blouses for us. However, I was attending an ecumenical gathering of women who began voicing the concern that, even in their nonliturgical traditions, they needed clergy blouses in order to be recognized as clergy, especially when they visited hospitals and nursing homes. This time the publishing house realized the market was wide and immediately sent me newly made shirts to be field-tested by our women seminarians. It wasn’t a good first try, but we were on the way.



In 1980, the LCA invited the American Lutheran Church and the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches to join in a conference to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the ordination of women. Churchwide organization staff, three presiding bishops, seminary faculty and 110 ordained women (out of 225) came to share both good and bad experiences, to study and worship together.

Many issues came out of the conference, directed at all phases of our church — congregations, synods/districts, theological education, language and sexuality. However, the primary concern for the women was “Synods aren’t helping us with the call process.”

The church heard the concerns and established a working group, which I chaired, to begin preparing bishops and their staff for “more effective recommendation, calling and support of women in congregations, agencies and institutions of our church bodies.” Three-day conferences in Wisconsin, Pennsylvania and California were held and attended by all district/synodical bishops plus one staff member, seminarians and women pastors, churchwide organization staff and the three presiding bishops. We struggled with issues that still haunt our church — theological and human language, issues with the call process, how to work with congregations for new models of ministry, couples in ministry,

maternity and paternity leave, and personal issues of sexism. Did everything turn around in one event? Of course not, but it was the church and its newest pastors working together on models for ministry and justice in this ever-changing church.

Yes, the times were a-changing. Thousands of women and congregations have experienced shared ministry enriched by those whom God would have previously called but the church would not have accepted.

The church continues to be a-changing. Thanks be to God.

Gracious and loving God, be with your people in these times of change. Give us vision to know your will for the church and courage to be your change agents. Bless us and keep us in your loving care. Amen.

The Rev. Jean Bozeman was ordained Nov. 14, 1976. She served as associate professor and dean of students at Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago from 1971 to 1989 and as assistant to the bishop, Virginia Synod, from 1989 to 2011. Prior to ordination she served mission congregations in Virginia, Florida, Missouri and Kansas from 1961 to 1964; St. Paul’s Lutheran Church, York, Pennsylvania, from 1964 to 1968; and as associate director, LCA Commission on Youth Ministry, from 1968 to 1971. She is retired and living in Norfolk, Virginia.



Celebrating You and Your Unique Story



This is Patricia (Pat) Hawley's story. She is one of the first ten women ordained in the American Lutheran Church/Lutheran Church in America/Evangelical Lutheran Church in America who are rostered in the Minneapolis Area Synod.

1. What is a story from your ministry that you would like to share?

It's a story on the way to ordained ministry. I was at my home congregation, St. James in Burnsville, Minnesota, when the speaker from Northwestern Lutheran Theological Seminary in St. Paul made a presentation. I asked him if he had any women in his classes. He thought a moment and then said, "I have one woman in class," and that was all I needed to know. By the fall of 1975, I was on the way to ordained ministry. It took me seven years to complete this journey. I was ordained on April 4, 1982.

2. When you think about your formation as a pastor, what is one experience that comes to mind?

It was the late summer of 1985, and I reclaimed my birth name as it is written on my baptism certificate. It was joyous and self-affirming, and the feelings have lasted throughout my ministry.

3. What words of wisdom would you share with a woman or girl who is considering becoming a pastor?

Four years into my ordained ministry, I was a founding pastor of the task force toward wholeness for women and men. It was in the Minnesota Synod of the Lutheran Church in America. Originally it was to be for the use of inclusive language for the church. It became a listening post for listening to women who were

experiencing some form of sexual harassment, which required more synod involvement that we did not have at the time. My advice is to be involved with the synod from the beginning.

4. What was considered "normal" at the beginning of your ministry that might surprise people today?

That we were meant to be coequal in terms of responsibility on a staff ministry team.

The following is a benediction taken from the New Zealand Prayer Book:

"God bless us and keep us. God's face shine on us and be gracious to us, and give us light and peace."

I was ordained on April 4, 1982. I served at House of Prayer in Richfield, Minnesota, and at Richfield Lutheran in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and as visitation pastor at Normandale Lutheran in Edina, Minnesota. I am currently retired.

I Love to Tell the Story



It was one of those clear summer nights in Iowa when the stars hang in constellations and galaxies so wondrous that they take your breath away. My friend Carol and I sat on the front porch of the parsonage, sipping lemonade and talking. "So, tell me, Peggy, how did you come to be a pastor?" Carol asked.

I began telling that glorious story of Jesus and his love, and how that Word made flesh took hold in my life, growing me and leading me onward in faith. Telling my Finnish grandmother the story of Jesus' birth with my three-year-old edits about "Mary having to ride on a donkey because her tummy was so big," bringing tears of laughter and joy to even that

stoic old Finn. When I got to the present day of sitting back and still wondering at such an amazing God as we gazed at the stars, I paused and said, “Wait a minute — that sounded way too good, too synchronized, too planned!” Then I sat back and wondered again...

O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic
is your name in all the earth!
... When I look at your heavens, the
work of your fingers,
The moon and the stars that you
have established;
What are human beings that you
are mindful of them,
Mortals that you care for them?

—Psalm 8:1, 3-4

I still wonder ... July 28, 2020, marked 35 years of serving as an ordained pastor in the LCA and ELCA: four congregational calls, one call as an assistant to a bishop, and now nine calls serving as an interim or transition pastor. I marvel at this and thank God for so many blessings along the way. Reflecting, I see God’s fingerprints everywhere. Even thinking back to that summer night and conversation, I marvel that my friend Carol (at the time a devout Roman Catholic charismatic) is now serving as an ordained ELCA pastor. Was God working even in the storytelling of that summer evening so many years ago? AMAZING! It takes my breath away.

Living in God’s amazing grace,

*Pastor Peggy A. Rose
Transition Pastor
Spirit of Grace Church
(A Lutheran Episcopal Community of Faith)
West Bloomfield, Michigan*

The Power of Humor



At my installation as associate pastor at Ascension Lutheran Church in Brookings, South Dakota, Senior Pastor Paul Hanson said, “I don’t think Pastor Rhonda and I will ever see eye-to-eye.” There was an audible gasp. We looked at each other, and then I stepped up beside him, revealing that he was head and shoulders taller than I. Then people sighed and laughed, albeit nervously. Pastor Paul and I came to the realization that the congregation needed to play more than it had prior to our service. Members seemed to be suffering from chronic anxiety, and we knew the power of humor to break down that chronic anxiety.

We decided to create two alter egos (or, as I liked to call them, “altar egos”) that would bring laughter into the sanctuary. We created two characters, Pastor Paul as Evin and me as Rude, “The only two anglers named after a fishing boat motor.” They would “fish” together in a boat in the front of the sanctuary and talk about faith, and their smart and good-looking pastors. We believed that such a “play ground” could return the sanctuary to holy ground.

We didn’t announce in advance when Evin and Rude would be present, but as soon as people saw the boat (a Montgomery Ward Sea King borrowed from one of the church’s fishermen), they knew this was not their typical worship service. People began to relax and eventually would laugh heartily instead of nervously. It was a powerful tonic that eased tensions in other areas of pastoral service as well.

The one skit that I’ll never forget was when we were in the midst of building a





new sanctuary. Bishop Andrea DeGroot-Nesdahl was scheduled to preach one Sunday, and Pastor Paul and I knew (with all due respect to Bishop Andrea) that she would preach too long and cause the service to run into the Sunday school hour. That would be a problem because we were worshiping in the fellowship hall, which housed some of the Sunday school classes and would need to be reset. So, we decided to put her in the boat with Evin and Rude.

I called and asked her for a copy of her sermon so we could choose appropriate hymns. This was true, although I doubt she really believed it. Once we had her sermon in hand, we turned its main points into a dialog between her and Evin and Rude.

When Bishop Andrea arrived for services, we told her what we were going to do. She was (and remains) a good sport. She had also had experience in community theater, so she was more than up to the task.

The text was Jesus and the disciples at Caesarea Philippi. The script was full of puns — good, bad and ugly. Perhaps the ugliest was when Bishop Andrea was talking about how Jesus rebuked Peter. Here's the script:

B: Jesus asked the disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” and Peter answered, “You are the Christ.”

E: Peter. He rocks.

B: But then, when Jesus explained that he would suffer and die, Peter rebuked him.

R: Rebuked? Does that mean “to buke again”? What does “buke” mean?

E: It's a car. “Wouldn't you really rather drive a Buke?”

R: Ah, the Geezer Car! If you admit to owning a Buke, raise your hand.

E: Get real, Rude. Nobody's going to raise their hand now that you've said it's a Geezer Car.

R: I guess that was real rude of me, huh. So, if Peter rebuked Jesus, does that mean he bought him a Buke to drive?

E: No, it means he ran him over and then backed over him. Get it: re-Buked.

The congregation roared with laughter, even the Buick owners.

The truth is, humor can break down chronic anxiety and lead to a more productive and effective pastorate. Laughter in worship is a good thing. Too often we — pastors and parishioners and bishops — take ourselves too seriously and fail to remember that humor is a gift of God that builds relationships, trust, and faith.

The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make the Lord's face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you. The Lord look upon you with favor and grant you peace.

Rhonda Hanisch, baptized April 29, 1959; ordained April 8, 1990; retired Jan. 1, 2019.

Early Discerning of the Call



My parents loved to remind me of this story. The year was 1971. My mother came home from a seventh-grade parent/teacher conference and told me that one of my teachers, married to a pastor, said I would make a great pastor's wife. My response: "If I am going to live in a parsonage, I am going to be the pastor!"

I have now retired in 2020 after 32 years of ministry and five calls. I have been married for 35 years to my artist husband, who also has an M.Div. Together over the years we have lived in two parsonages and owned three homes. Discerning God's call to serve? Comes in various forms!

May you ever find ways to offer God's word of comfort, challenge and hope in your life!

Barbara Kopperud, Concordia College Class of 1981, attended Wartburg Theological Seminary 1982-1987, M.Div. 1987, ordained January 1988, serving five congregations as a pastor in the ELCA from 1988-2020, retired summer of 2020.

God's Presence Everywhere



Even at his grandpa's funeral, little four-year-old Will was running with excitement around the holy altar space at the front of the funeral home chapel. His grandpa's urn sat on a small table surrounded by many flowers. Will encircled the area with his new tennis shoes that joyfully sparkled with red-and-blue flashing lights every time his feet

touched the floor. He paused when I came up to him.

"Grandpa's bones are in there," he told me, pointing to the urn, "but Grandpa is up there in the sky."

"That's right," I said.

Unfamiliar with clergy robes, he said, "Why are you wearing that?" Then, seeing the wide length of my sleeves, he asked, "Are you going to fly up to the sky and see Grandpa?"

"No," I said, "I'm going to stay right here and say prayers for Grandpa."

With intuitive innocence, he said, "Should I take off my shoes?"



The night Margie was dying, her breath of life had slowed yet was still rhythmic. Her life had been rhythmic. She loved music; she loved to dance. On Saturday nights, after milking cows with her sailor husband, they would go to barn dances. "Oh, how we would dance!" she had told me once with a huge smile. Though her memory was weak, this she held in her soul. As she was dying, I prayed she had glimpses of the waltz she would dance in heaven. And then she took her last breath. Her friend Alice, who lived in the adjoining room, then started to cry out, "Close the door! I can't sleep! The angels standing there are too bright!"



"God answers prayers!" she looked at me with resolve. Her steel blue eyes seemed incongruent to her weak hands, which trembled with Parkinson's disease. "I can't get my zipper up on my pants anymore. So I just stand there a moment quietly and pray, 'Please God, help me with my zipper,' and the next thing I know, my pants are zipped. It happens all the time like that. I wish my sons would

believe that. I tell them, 'Just ask God to help you. He will. Even with little things. You just have to ask.'"

Blessing for the reader: May your heart always be open to God's presence everywhere.

Bonnie Nash, ordained Feb. 7, 1988. "Hospice ministry has consistently opened my eyes to God's sacred presence in our living and in our dying," she writes. "In the culmination of my ministry, I was so blessed in being able to help create Grace Hospice from the ground up."



Me Neither

Opal and Therbert were members of the first congregation I served (in south Florida), circa 1999. They, like so many of that congregation, were retired "snowbirds" who just came during the winter months and so were not present when the vote was taken to call me.

We met for the first time in November-ish. Sometime after the first of the year, Therbert said, "You know, I've never had a female pastor and, because of that, I don't think I would have voted to call you. ... That would have been a terrible mistake."

I said, "It is kind of weird for me too! I've never had a female pastor either. ... I'm glad I didn't let that stop me."

He said, "Me too!"

A graduate of Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary, the Rev. Sara Ilderton was ordained in 1999 and served one congregation in South Florida and two in North Carolina before being called, in 2017, to serve as one of the assistants to the bishop of the North Carolina Synod.

Billions of Particulars



I was 12 when I felt the call to be a pastor. I am not, however, a cradle Lutheran. Martin Marty describes "vocation" as being revealed in "billions of particulars." For many of us, there is not a datable flash of lightning or a one-time born-again experience. As Lutherans, we are convinced that we are constantly being justified and made anew through the waters of our baptism. Our call, therefore, is really a progression of our life story.

My mother was a single parent who divorced my father when I was just a year old. Originally from northern Minnesota, my mother went to school in New Mexico to become a teacher. Her side of the family was typical American Protestant (meaning her family would bounce between various mainline churches) whereas my father's side was Mexican Catholic. As to my baptism, a stalemate ensued and, along with many other parents in the 90s, mine decided "to have her decide when she's older." When I was 5, my mom was granted sole custody and we moved back up north to be with her side of the family.

My mother's own calling led her to get her master's in special education while working full-time as a teacher. A popular community program at the Baptist church called Kid's Club became my introduction to the church.

Then, when I was 10, my mom met a man who would later become my dad. Dave was raised on an Iowa hog farm, reared in a devout German Lutheran family. He suggested that we join our town's Lutheran church. The rest is history! In my 12th year, I was baptized, was given my Bible, was introduced to Holy Communion and started confirmation! My parent's call of steadfastness, faith and encouragement is a prime example of the billions of particulars that led me to the priesthood.



As we celebrate 50 years of women's ordination on this continent, I am reminded of one particular instance that forever impacted my view of a woman priest. It became common knowledge in my town and school that I was going to be a pastor. At a college fair for Badger Girls State (an American Legion conference for women's empowerment) I visited this booth that said "Wisconsin Lutheran College."

Note: At 16, I had no idea that there were different kinds of Lutherans. At first, they were buttering me up, giving me their spiel. I then asked about their pre-seminary programs because "I feel called to be a pastor!" Second note: Up until that point I had always received an enthusiastic response, so I had a cheeky grin on my face. Their sales pitch immediately quieted down under their weighty frown. They brought out a brochure that explained what the WELS were all about: "Women were just not made to be pastors," they said. This was the first instance (other than the innocently asked "Can girls be pastors?") where I was told that, because of who I am, my call that I feel from God is not real. I remember walking slowly over to this big puffy chair and sitting there with other college booth bags. Selah.

Then something happened. I walked to a nearby public computer and searched: "Lutheran college accepts women." The first thing that popped up was this article from St. Olaf College. I had never heard of this place before. The article mentioned that the college was the first Norwegian coeducational college in the United States, even from its beginning in 1874. I clicked through page after page to discover more about this place. I fell in love! It was like a dreamland, a haven for aspiring

theologians of the Lutheran faith. Everything about St. Olaf fascinated me, and it became my dream school. Though the saga could continue into how I beat the unlikely odds of actually getting in, it is best to say that, despite being told by an entire group of fellow Lutherans that I am not accepted, that my sex is unworthy of the office, that in persona Christi could not possibly be in a body like mine, I not only went to my dream school and loved every minute of it but also came to know that my call from God is as holy and as valid as anyone else's.

Pastor Emily K. Stelling was ordained in March 2020, just in time to experience the pastorate in a pandemic. She is the pastor of Bethany & Pilgrim Lutheran Parish in northwest Wisconsin.



"The best way out of a challenging situation is to go through it."

In the fall of 1984, I gave a trial sermon to the fine folks of the former Christ Lutheran Church in Rochester, New York. They had been served only by male pastors since their founding. I knew that some of the congregants had serious reservations about the possibility of having a female pastor. Some of my Dad's wise words came to mind as I prepared for this day: The best way out of a challenging situation is to go through it. I also knew that I had been blessed with an entire family with a sense of humor. So I decided to draw upon both of these resources.

Somewhere in the sermon I said this: "I realize that having a female pastor would be very new and challenging to some of you. But I am who I am: a called servant of God who happens to

be a woman. And, let me tell you—boy, is my beloved spouse, Doug, glad! So am I.” Lots of laughter followed; the “ice” was broken. I was called that day to be their pastor and served there for almost 21 years! I continue to give great thanks to God for that privilege.

Leading, loving God, I give great thanks for your call to serve as a pastor for Jesus Christ these many years. Guide and bless all whom you call to serve in whatever capacity, for you are an awesome God and we love you. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Darlene Bowden Muschett was ordained on Sept. 19, 1981, and served two part-time calls in Ithaca, New York, and Cortland, New York, before serving at Christ Lutheran Church.

“You never know who you are going to be seated next to at the heavenly banquet.”



Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests (Matthew 22:10).

In my second call, to a congregation in central Pennsylvania, I discovered pretty early on, in the course of a visit to a parishioner who was in the hospital, that said parishioner was the half-sister of a very famous politician. A politician that I would never have dreamed of meeting in my life and whom I did not want ever to meet. Well, I decided that I would probably never meet this particular politician and just focused on ministering to this woman and her husband, as well as the rest of the congregation. Toward the end of my time there, this particular woman and her

husband were celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary. Their adult daughter wanted to throw a surprise party for them and invited me to come and preside over their wedding vow renewal. I joyfully accepted.

When I walked into the party with the church organist, who also had been invited, standing before us was this particular politician, the one who stood for everything I stood against. And my reaction was one of shock and surprise, and I turned to the organist and said, “Is that ... ?” And he responded, “Oh, yeah, he’s really nice, I can introduce you.” I politely declined, because I had been struck with a case of starstruck-ness; I could never talk to this man. Well, the party went on, and the husband of this politician’s half-sister came up to me and said, “Let me introduce you to ... ” and before I knew it, there I was, shaking this man’s hand and having my picture taken with him. As I recently preached to my current congregation, you never know who you are going to be seated next to at the heavenly banquet. It may well be someone who stood for the polar opposite of everything that you fought for in this life. As the evening went on, I observed this politician dancing with his wife, and for a moment, I forgot his public persona and saw just a man spending time with his loved ones. And I think that’s what we are called to preach in this society. Not karma, which is not a Christian concept anyway, or schadenfreude, taking delight in the suffering of others, but instead, love and mercy, the way of Jesus, and recognizing the humanity in even our worst enemy.

This is the awesome and awe-filled calling that God has put before me and may well be putting before you who are reading this.

The Rev. Tonya Eza was ordained in 2012, and is serving her third call in Johnstown, New York, after serving her first call in Powell, Wyoming, and her second in suburban Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

**“If you have a dream,
pursue it!”**



My desire to enter ministry began when I was a teenager, inspired by reading the story of a well-known Christian saint/evangelist in India (Sadhu Sundar Singh, a convert to the Christian faith). I was eventually led by the Holy Spirit to apply for theological studies at a time when women did not enter such a field, let alone become pastors (1969). I was the first female student from South India to study at the United Theological College (UTC), Bangalore, India, and graduated with a Bachelor's in Divinity in 1972. By the time I left the seminary in 1972, it was gratifying for me to see that my decision to enter theological education influenced four more women who had joined UTC. Sadly, the church I belonged to (Church of South India) at that time did not ordain women. So, my journey in ministry began in working with women and youth. It took six more years for that church to ordain women (in 1978), and I thus missed my chance of being ordained, because by that time I had married a Lutheran.

When the Lutheran churches began ordaining women, I had left the country with my husband to the United States for higher studies. Those women who came after me were ordained. A few years later, when my husband served the Lutheran World Federation in Geneva, Switzerland, I served the English-speaking Lutheran congregation as the president and ministered to the congregation during a pastoral vacancy for two years. It took me 21 years, which included raising two children and supporting my husband's career in Geneva, to realize my dream of being an ordained pastor in the ELCA — in 1996, when my family moved from Geneva to Philadelphia.

What a dream it turned out to be! I served for 19 years in the ELCA, in two white

congregations here in the Philadelphia area. My first call was to St. John's, Mayfair, a large congregation, in a staff ministry. I worked there for four years, and my second call was to Redeemer Lutheran, Penndel, a midsize white congregation, as a solo pastor. I was their first female pastor and a colored Indian woman, who served that church for 16 years and eventually retired from it in 2015. I even got an opportunity to preach at the Churchwide Assembly of the ELCA in 2013. After my retirement I did serve for 15 months as an interim in two other congregations. The food pantries I started at St. John's and at Redeemer continue to serve those who are hungry in those localities. I will always cherish my time as a pastor, and I thank God for fulfilling my dream.

A story of a 64 year-old lady comes to mind as I recollect memories of my ordained ministry. I used to see this lady, who came to worship every Sunday, but during Communion, when I invited the members to come, she never came to receive it. I asked her but did not get an answer. Then, one Sunday, her granddaughter was confirmed and received her first Communion. I assume the Holy Spirit must have nudged that lady to seek me out after that service. She called me the next day and wanted to see me. She told me that she was not baptized as a child and, even though she baptized her child, she was ashamed to seek Baptism as an adult and that is why she could not take Communion. Now she wanted to be baptized, but in a private service, which I did, just for her, with her family present, and she was baptized. The following Sunday, it was a joy to see a smile on her face as she came forward to receive her first Communion at age 64! She died few years later.



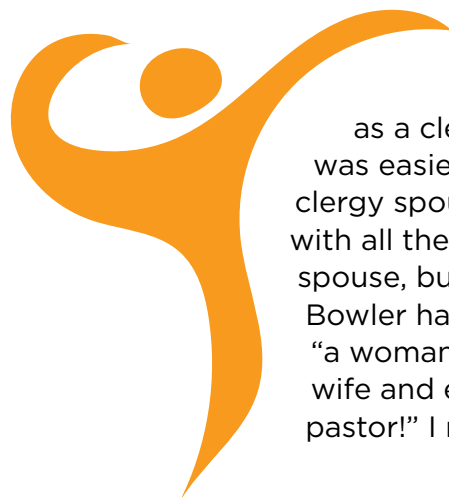


My second recollection happened when the tsunami hit India and Southeast Asia in 2004. My mother died during that time. I could not go to India to attend her funeral because all flights were canceled. The following Sunday, I was overwhelmed to see the love of my congregation. After the church service, they made me stand in front of the altar, sang my favorite hymn, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," and after the hymn each member came forward with a red rose and gave it to me. I was showered with love, which I cannot forget.

My advice to the younger generation: if you have a dream, pursue it even if it takes years to realize it. Your ministry is not merely what you do on Sundays in worship but the relationships you build with your congregation and the community and how you love and care for the people you serve.

Gracious Lord, you lead us in mysterious ways to fulfill your vision for your kingdom. Help us to have patience to accommodate your vision in our lives. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Esther Rajashekar was ordained on March 9, 1996. She is an Asian Indian woman who served two predominantly white congregations in northeast Philadelphia for a total of 19 years and also served as bridge pastor for 15 months after her retirement in 2015.



"Ordination is a risk that demands courage"



"There are two Pastors Gauche ... " The joke in our house in 1995 was this: When you answered the telephone (yes, the blue one that hung on the kitchen wall) and someone asked for Pastor Gauche, your response could be: "Do you want the cute one or the younger one? There are two Pastors Gauche." Think about how befuddled the person would get when they would have to choose between those two categories. I've just celebrated my 25th ordination anniversary; I was ordained in 1995, and my husband Paul was ordained in 1984.

Transitioning from the spouse of a pastor to a pastor as well brought lots of interesting shifts. I had always been in ministry in the field of children, youth and family, so I came to ordination with a deeply profound understanding of ministry. I loved the journey I traveled to ordination. But what I didn't love was the constant need to help people understand each of us as individual pastors. It was making a shift from an unofficial position of power to a formal position of power.

My husband, Paul, and I had the benefit of working through our particular calls and shifts in call with the benefit of a seminary education. But now we had to help a congregation understand that! It was difficult for people to understand Paul as a clergy spouse, but somehow it was easier for them to categorize me as a clergy spouse. Paul did not have to struggle with all the expectations of being a pastor's spouse, but I felt the pressure, as Kate Bowler has pointed out, to live the story of "a woman who started off as somebody's wife and ended up as everyone's almost-pastor!" I remember when I got ordained,

my candidacy committee at the time asked me about the statistic that half of all clergy couples ended in divorce. What put us at such risk? It was like we didn't know how to build a new framework of understanding around not only ordained female pastors but couples who both found their callings in ordination. We know many clergy couples who are doing just fine in their marriage relationships. Every couple, in all professions, have to come to understand how to work their "vocations" out as a married couple.

For us, the challenges consisted of two people working full-time in demanding public ministry, with lots of moving pieces of life we couldn't control (births and deaths and illness and weddings). Ministry added pressures to our already full lives with two young children. Gender-role expectations could support us or destroy us. We learned quickly to choose our roles based on our strengths and going in the direction of where we found ourselves thriving, asking questions such as "What are you good at?" "What gives you energy?" and "Where do you best succeed?" At the beginning we were clumsy in how we found our way around our ministry calls. After 10 years of leading in the same church, we decided that it would be healthier for us to each have separate calls to give us personally more breathing room and a greater expanse of community.

We stayed in the same parish together for our kids growing up, so we could be family together in our faith formation, but when they got older we could find another avenue of freedom apart from each other that enriched us. We loved working together, but we also loved finding our own paths in separate and different communities. It balanced out life in a way that caused both of us to thrive. Ultimately for me it goes back to what I learned about marriage from Madeleine L'Engle in her book *The Irrational Season*:

[T]here comes a time when a decision must be made. Ultimately two people who love each other must ask themselves how much they hope for as their love grows and deepens, and how much risk they are willing to take. It is indeed a fearful gamble. Because it is the nature of love to create, a marriage itself is something which has to be created. To marry is the biggest risk in human relations that a person can take. If we commit ourselves to one person for life this is not, as many people think, a rejection of freedom; rather it demands the courage to move into all the risks of freedom, and the risk of love which is permanent; into that love which is not possession, but participation. It takes a lifetime to learn another person. When love is not possession, but participation, then it is part of that co-creation which is our human calling.

Ordination has a similar journey as love, in my experience. I've been in a tiny church as a called lay pastor, in a medium-size church as a children, youth and family director, and in a large church as an associate pastor. I've been in para-church ministry and on specialized rostered call at a Lutheran seminary. In each of these places I've had the challenge of creating my call. It is the nature of ordination ministry to create; it is something that has to be created in each individual and in each new context. Ordination is a risk that demands courage because ordination in one sense is not a possession but participation in God's



ongoing work and ministry. It takes a lifetime to learn and co-create our callings. But for me the 25-year adventure has been worth the journey of every step!

May you be courageous to always keep co-creating your role and movement in ministry. May you move into all the risks of freedom and participation for the fullness of life. And may you be filled with the playfulness and joy of the Holy Spirit!

Pastor Nancy Lee Gauche, Burnsville, Minnesota, was ordained October 1, 1995.

Women Sent in Ministry From the Open Tomb to the World



Ten years before women could be ordained to pastoral ministry in the ELCA and its predecessor bodies, I was consecrated as a Lutheran deaconess in 1960. Women have been in Christian ministry since the open tomb.

Formed in a community of women in theological studies at Valparaiso University shaped my vision for servant leadership. My first call was to a congregation in St. Louis. There I discovered that Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod Concordia Seminary offered a master’s degree in religion in the graduate school. (Male pastors at that time received a Bachelor of Divinity degree.) Two of us women studied among 800 men, before women could pursue a degree at seminaries of the American Lutheran Church or Lutheran Church in America.

However, after serving in the congregation for four years, at the age of 25, I was “retired” when my husband, Burton, and I adopted a

child. Women in the 1960s were beginning to be able to have a professional life while married, but not as mothers. I, like so many women, assumed that was “the way it is” and was put away silently.

During the 1960s and ’70s, while I was “off the roster,” my theology was shaped on the streets of the inner cities of Detroit and New Haven, Connecticut, where Burton served as pastor. Ministry means walking around outside, listening and working for justice. As a community organizer during the civil rights movement, I often took our three sons with me.

Rules in regard to women being mothers and still serving as deaconesses changed in the 1970s, when I was again recognized as a deaconess. People change rules and thus change lives just as the ELCA changed rules in regard to LGBTQ people in 2009. However, as with the ordination of women, moving from being left out to let in involves internal as well as external struggle. Sexism, homophobia, transphobia, racism and ableism are real and consequential. Becoming a more inclusive church frees and changes the church.

In 1973, while living in New Haven, I went across town to Yale Divinity School and enrolled. (Concordia, when, after the schism, it became more conservative, no longer claimed me as a graduate, but legally they had to send on my transcript.) Upon graduation from Yale, I was invited to stay on and teach there as a lecturer.

In the 70s women could now be ordained in the ALC and LCA. Because I was now teaching people who would become pastors, I discerned, with encouragement from colleague professors, to seek ordination. With the blessing of my deaconess community, which I did not leave, I was ordained to pastoral ministry at Yale Divinity School. This was a first for a deaconess. Also, although there were seven women teaching at Yale then, having an

ordained woman from a liturgical tradition was a first. At my ordination people said, "Now that you are going up to higher things ..." I rejected not only patriarchy but that hierarchical view of ministry.

While teaching and preaching and presiding at Eucharist at Yale, I also served an LCA congregation across the street. However, after a few months, the senior pastor called me in to say, "I wanted to teach at Yale. You have the opportunity; I don't. You are going to succeed, but you are not going to do it in my congregation!" Once again, I was dismissed, put away silently, as Joseph thought he should do with Mary, to avoid personal "disgrace." But an angel of the Lord said to Joseph: "Do not be afraid." So, too, churches need not to be afraid of women bearing Christ's message, "God is with us."

I thrived while teaching at Yale and discerned this was my ministerial calling. Concurrently I served part-time at a local Methodist church. The Methodist pastor there, a good partner, saw a public notice of an opening at Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa. I applied and became the first woman seminary professor in a tenure-track position in the ALC. Teaching included sacramental ministry and pastoral ministry to hundreds of students.

Ministers of Word and Sacrament reach deeper into the word and further out into the world. I used summer and sabbatical time to carry out a pastoral ministry of visitation. Traveling to about 200 congregations across the country where graduates five, 10, 20 years out were serving. I walked around the neighborhood with them, heard about their congregation's mission and engaged in relational ministry

of conversing about their struggles and joys. I knew if I were going to continue teaching future pastors and deacons, I needed to continue to learn from them. This mirrors the calling of pastors to visit members in the worlds in which they live, equipping the laos (people) for ministry in daily life.

As a woman, rather than use the then-typical hierarchical methods, I taught collaborative styles of learning and leading. As a feminist I worked for the full partnership of women and men. Serving on the ELCA Study of Ministry enabled me to help design and be a strong advocate for diaconal ministry. Women became free to be pastors and men to be deacons. Ministry was finally based on gifts, not gender.

Teaching at Wartburg also led to becoming an author and columnist and speaking nationally and internationally. Since concluding my years of parish and inner-city ministry and 41 years of being a teaching theologian, I now continue as a speaker and mentor, in the midst of COVID, mostly by Zoom.

To a girl or woman discerning a call to ordained pastoral ministry: Be open to God's call through prayer, good counsel and discernment of personal and ecclesial call. Be open to serve anywhere the church calls you! Know that you are serving a faith community and also in the public world with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

"Now to [the one] who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to [God] be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen" (Ephesians 3:20).

The Rev. Dr. Norma Cook Everist, Distinguished Professor of Church and Ministry, emerita, Wartburg Theological Seminary, ordained 1977.

Yep, I Can Do That, and You Can Too



I tagged along. I grew up in a household of people whom today we would call introverts, folks who got re-energized by pulling weeds in the garden (uck!) or listening to music with the door closed (dull!) or creating some work of art either with pencils or with wood (boring!). But I, I got energized from people, and so I tagged along. I tagged along wherever, whenever I could. I'd run errands with my sister, go to the office with my dad and ladies' aid, Bible study, coffee or visits with shut-ins from our congregation with my mom. It was on one of these visits that I first heard the summons to work for the church.

I heard many stories from one of our retired, shut-in pastors in our congregation. He and his wife would set tea out, and after we had shared a word of Scripture and talked about church news, they would share stories from the parishes they had served, stories of people they had loved and been privileged to know. They spoke of ministries and passions they had fostered and lives they had impacted. I thought it sounded like a wonderful life, one that combined my love of church with people. What could be better?

I am the youngest of three daughters, and after one of these visits, I recall declaring to my oldest sister that I had decided what I wanted to be when I grew up. To which she asked, "What?," barely looking up from her textbook. To which I said, "A pastor's wife." My oldest sister was already in college at this time, and it was the mid-70s, so with exasperation she replied, "Meg, why don't you be the pastor?" And she went back to reading.

But her comment got me thinking. And I as I continued to tag along — with my dad to college worship services led by some

of the first intern female candidates in our denomination, and along to church meetings where eventually I served alongside adult members, and then later as I tagged along to friends' congregations that looked different from mine, I watched more and thought more often, "Yep, I could lead that. I could do that." And so, I have.

Twenty-five years after my conversation with my sister, I was driving my two young children home from school. My daughter was in first grade and my son in third. We were talking about what they wanted to be when they grew up. My daughter had lots of ideas: dancer, truck driver, pastor. Then, after my son shared that he wanted to be an astronaut, I suggested to him that maybe he would like to consider being a pastor someday, to which he responded, "Mom, I couldn't be a pastor." I asked, "Why not?" And he said, "Only women can be pastors."

At the time I was serving a two-point rural country church. The colleagues we had over to the house most often were two women who lived close to us. As we approached the parsonage, I drove past it the extra quarter mile to the white-steepled country church. My kids asked, "Why are we at church?" I just said, "Come on, follow me." And we got out of the car and went downstairs to "the wall" in the fellowship hall.

"The wall" in country churches is where pictures of past pastors are prominently displayed. I asked my son, "Honey, how many pastors do you see on this wall?" He looked at the long line of male pictures — until he got to the final two, and there, among a wall of white men, hung two pictures of women, me and my predecessor — who was part of a clergy couple. "Honey,"





I said, “You can be a pastor — if you want. Men have been good pastors for a long time. You even know some.” And we listed a few awesome colleagues that he had forgotten about. “But you don’t have to be. And your sister, she can be a pastor and she would be great, but she doesn’t have to be. But regardless, God will use your gifts — and your sister’s — to show God’s love in Jesus to the world. The church didn’t fully realize that in the past, but it does today.”

We thank you, God, that you use siblings to speak truth to us. Continue to utilize our gifts and to recognize the gifts in each individual — regardless of gender, sexuality, race or age — to build up your church and bring your love to the world. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Margaret (Meg) Eiben Hoversten, ordained in 2002, is serving her third parish in the La Crosse Area Synod where she lives with her husband and supports her two adult children, now 20 and 23, who do not work full-time for the church but are both sharing their gifts with the church and God’s world.

Be Strong and Courageous



I firmly believe that “Faith is caught, and not taught!” I initially “caught” my faith from my mother and Sunday school teachers in our little Danish United Evangelical Lutheran church. Yearly the church hosted “Theologian in Residence” weekends. The Rev. Dr. Gerhard Frost was our first. Dr. Frost was working on a book of meditations that would eventually

be published as *Homing in the Presence*. At that point in life I was a nurse and children’s choir director. When Dr. Frost returned the following year, bringing copies of *Homing in the Presence*, I told him that I had just received my acceptance to Wartburg Seminary. He autographed my copy of the book with Isaiah 12:2 (NIV), written on the cover page:

“Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. The Lord, the Lord himself, is my strength and my defense.”

There were 15 women in my seminary class, and most of us second-career. A comment made by a professor at the start of seminary questioned if women were capable of thinking theologically. After our first-quarter theology test there were 13 A’s, and 11 were awarded to female classmates.

Our class of ’82 was advised that there was no shortage of clergy seeking calls. Many of my female classmates waited over a year for calls. I was fortunate to be ordained on Sept. 12, 1982.

In the past 38 years I have been blessed to have served as an assistant to Bishop Dennis Anderson, as senior pastor of five congregations, a mission developer and term pastor.

There is one frequent comment that I heard in my first call and in every call since, including a thank-you card I received last week: “Wow, I never thought a woman could preach as well as you do.”

My advice for any girl or woman considering ordained ministry would be Joshua 1:9 “Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.”

The Rev. Susan B. Sheffer-Meyer

**“You can make it—just
let God lead you.”**



My name is Rev. Dr. Felicia Campbell. I am founder of Love, Faith & Hope Church and founder of For Your Consciousness Ministries. In 1985, with only ten members, all of whom were women, we began the church in my basement every Thursday. From there we outgrew that space and worshiped at St. Mary’s Church in Chicago. It was here that I was ordained as a minister by the late Lena Washington. I wasn’t looking for ordination; I was looking to teach people Bible lessons. But she insisted that I was called to the ministry by the Holy Spirit, and she ordained me.

The church continued to grow, and we later began to have services at Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago on Thursdays. The membership grew, and we began to look for our own building. Prior to this I had a bachelor’s degree in speech and theater from Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. With that in mind, the first building we bought was a theater, and I was amazed by God’s divine sense of humor. I then said, “God, are you for real? I am going to have church in a theater.” His response was “Yes, and go forward.”

The church needed many repairs, so we used our entire treasury of \$10,000 to make a down payment on the building, and the Rev. Clay Evans installed me as pastor, with the prayers from the late Mother Consuela York.

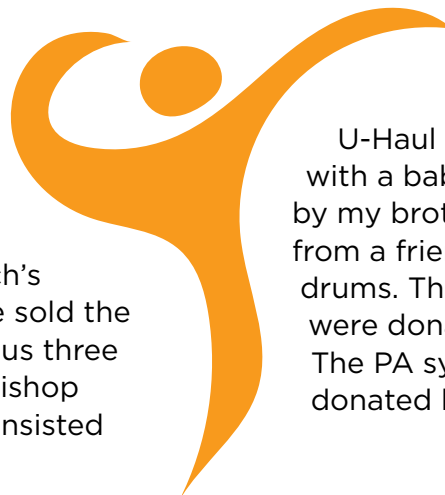
Another interesting point was that I knew the owner of the church building because I was a mistress of ceremony at his church’s choir musical night. As a result he sold the building for only \$35,000, giving us three years to pay. I immediately told Bishop Washington the good news. She insisted

that I have a women’s shelter in the church to pay the bills. The first check we received for this program was \$35,000, meaning that the church was paid for in one year.

We had a women’s shelter in the church, and we were able to purchase the next-door building for \$25,000, which was used for a women’s and children’s shelter. We were able to pay that building off in one year with a surprise check. It was then that we realized that the community needed more than a shelter, so we started a food pantry. The day the pantry opened, we served 50 families, and today we serve over 200 families. The women didn’t have a place for their children to go over the summer months, so we started a summer camp. We started with 20 children and ended up with 45 children from the community. We served them breakfast, lunch and dinner and took them on various field trips. Once the summer program ended, we realized the children needed help with their homework, so we started an after-school program for over 40 children. Thanksgiving came, and we realized that people needed to eat, so we started serving Thanksgiving dinner every year, partnering with Lee n’ Eddies catering. Christmas came around, and the children needed toys, so we partnered with Toys for Tots, receiving 300 toys for children both in the shelter and in the community. We needed some musical instruments, and we received an

organ from the late Pastor Clay Evans from the Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church in Chicago. One summer, as the children were out playing, a

U-Haul truck parked in front of the church with a baby grand piano that was donated by my brother in California. The drums came from a friend who was purchasing new drums. The altar, the cross and the cloth were donated by Uptown Lutheran Church. The PA system and the altar chairs were donated by the Rev. Dr. Robert Hunt, and



the roster was donated by a retired Christ Universal Temple instructor.

What was our secret? Our secret was that every week, from Friday 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. on Saturday, we had a prayer shut-in with six children asking God to give us what was needed for the church. Today we have over 25 children that have completed college and are employing various skills. These are the children who prayed with us Friday nights and worked in our youth program. From that group, 10 babies were birthed. Everything in the church was donated: the benches, the chairs, the tables, refrigerators, freezers, dishes and desks.

Our membership has dwindled a bit due to the change in the community, but we are working toward building up again. Currently we still have our food pantry, summer camp, after-school, NA/AA meetings, Teen Moms and HIV counseling. During this time I finished my master's in media communications from Governors State University, a master's in divinity from the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, and my doctorate from the Chicago Theological Seminary. My work in the community enabled me to raise my two daughters. My daughter Angela has a bachelor's degree from Emory University and a master's degree from Georgia Tech. My other daughter, Antionette, graduated with a bachelor's degree from Tuskegee University and is currently working on a master's degree in special education.

My words to a female pastor are: stay the course, don't give up, and watch God change things. You can make it — just let God lead you.

It works, if you work it!

Humbly submitted by the Rev. Dr. Felicia Campbell

From Roots to Rainbows



It all began when I was a girl scout in Copenhagen, Denmark, where I was born and grew up. My troop had invited the first woman ordained into the Danish Lutheran State Church to speak to us about the ups and downs of having served as an ordained prison chaplain since 1947. That experience made me think about possibly becoming a pastor myself someday.

A few years later, my home church was seeking a new senior pastor, and more than two dozen applications had arrived at my dad's desk — since he was the chair of the church council. Among the applicants were two women, and I asked my dad if he would recommend either of them to the position. He said that he definitely would, and that confirmed in my mind that, whatever my future would entail, my parents would give me their blessing. These two recollections stayed with me, as I then knew anything would be possible, as long as I trusted God to guide me and I had friends and family to support me. Today, my home church has been served by a woman pastor for years, and for my later doctoral dissertation I was able in 1971 to interview 25 of the 35 women pastors serving the Danish Church at that time.

In 1962 I immigrated to the United States, and after spending several years working for Pan Am, traveling around the world and working for Young Life in Germany, I returned to the United States to continue my education. In 1968 I entered the University of Chicago Divinity School, and I received my Doctor of Ministry degree in 1972 — two days before I was ordained and called to serve as assistant pastor to Faith Lutheran Church, Homewood, Illinois.

Prior to my ordination, I went to the Lutheran Church in America's national convention in



1970, together with a couple other female students, all of us wearing a sign saying “future pastor.” It caused a lot of stir, but we all know now what the outcome of the convention was. As the only female student in my class, and studying close to a Lutheran seminary, I could write a book on the comments I endured from male Lutheran students, though my interdenominational classmates and my Lutheran professors were very encouraging and supportive. Comments I remember, which would probably not be heard today, are “A woman pastor is like a dog standing on its hind legs,” “Don’t worry about her, she will only last a year,” “You don’t look like a pastor” and “How can you be a pastor if you marry, and what if you don’t?” While I was a student I was also involved with other students in visiting parishes and arguing for the ordination of women, and I later traveled to various synods to speak with bishops and leaders to help prepare documents and certificates that would change the male pronoun. These were exciting and challenging years.

With God’s help and the support of my family, I grew in how to handle the ups and downs in the church with a promise to myself. Whenever anyone confronted me in negative ways, I decided that was THEIR problem, not mine! And with regard to how long I would last as a pastor ... time would take care of that! I never minded being the first female pastor in the LCA in the Midwest; I just did not want to be the last! In 1971 I married Thomas C. Knutson, who transferred from The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod to the LCA before his ordination in 1974. We thus became the first pastoral husband-wife team in the LCA,

though we served separate congregations our entire ministry. Sadly, my husband died from cancer in 2013.

In 1975, I decided it was time to get together with the other few Lutheran women pastors, and nine of us met at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago in April 1975, celebrating five years of women’s ordination. The Rev. Elizabeth Platz presided at the event. It has been wonderful and inspirational for me to attend the following anniversary celebrations and to experience how God’s church has been enriched in so many various ministries by strong and dedicated women of all ages and backgrounds.

I have been richly blessed by serving three parishes as pastor, six parishes as interim, nine years as an oncology chaplain and five years as assistant to the first African American bishop of the ELCA.

If I would give advice to any girl/woman as she considers serving God as a Lutheran pastor, it would be for her to remember that it is a privilege and a power-filled commitment to serve God as a pastor. It is a lifelong calling grounded in the word of God. An advice given to me on my ordination day has stayed with me: “Always be a servant of God, but do not become a doormat.”

God bless you and strengthen you as you serve, or consider serving, the ordained ministry of Word and Sacrament as your chosen vocation.

My name is Karen Elizabeth (Pedersen) Knutson. I was born in 1939 in Copenhagen, Denmark, and I have been a pastor in the LCA/ELCA since my ordination on Sept. 3, 1972. I was married in 1971 and have three children and four granddaughters. I am a retired pastor in the Slovak Zion Synod/ELCA.



Not Knowing What to Do



Sixteen days after my ordination and ten days after I began my first call, I was driving to my new church office in a town that was still unfamiliar. I turned on NPR and heard what I first thought was the description of a new horror movie: planes hitting the twin towers in New York City, a plane crashing into the Pentagon, a plane downed in rural Pennsylvania.

I took a wrong turn and barely found my way to the church that morning. I was numb. Throughout the day my parish colleagues and I went between watching the horror unfold on TV and planning a vigil to be held at church that night.

I was so new to ordained ministry and so badly shaken that all I could think was, “I have no idea what to do.” I went home later that afternoon to dress for the vigil, surprised I could find my way. As I stood at my closet and reached for my clergy shirt, I burst into tears. I yelled at God, “Why have you called me to ministry when I have no idea what to do?”

I fumbled to put on my collar (all these years later, I still struggle with the collar studs), and that night I stumbled through the parts of the service that I led. But despite my self-doubt and protestations to God, I made it through the service, and our community had a place to start healing from the trauma of 9/11. What God had called me to, God had equipped me for.

Throughout the 19 years since that day, there have been numerous times when I didn’t know what to do: How do I preach to a devastated university community following the suicide of a beloved student and the fraternity hazing death of another? How do I work toward reforming a congregational and church preschool system after years of unhealth?

How do I keep my privacy and yet honor my experience of infertility, in vitro fertilization and two miscarriages (the second of which occurred the day I returned from a sabbatical), and the joyful experience of adoption?

As many times as I have doubted myself and doubted God, I have equally experienced this truth: Whatever God calls me to, God will equip me for. I have made it through difficulties I couldn’t have imagined, including the pivot this year to online ministry due to COVID-19. I may not always know what to do, but what my experience of ordained ministry has taught me is that God does. And whatever God entrusts to me, and to all of us, will always come with what we need — whether creativity, community or courage — to meet it. Thanks be to God.

Beloved God, when I doubt myself and what you ask of me, instill in me the confidence that whatever you call me to, you will equip me for. Amen.

Pastor Jana Schofield was ordained Aug. 26, 2001, served as a campus/parish pastor in San Luis Obispo, California, for 10 years, and currently serves as a parish pastor in Ferndale, Washington, where she lives with her spouse, Michael, and son, Tae.

God Calls a Texas Girl



The calling to serve God as an ordained minister came to me in the early 60s when women were not allowed. While attending Texas Lutheran College (now University), I sat with a synod committee to determine whether or not I could enter the pre-theological program. “No,” I was told. The guy being considered next to me was blessed with a “yes.” I was approved to enter another Christian vocation such as Christian education.

Not being one to question the church's authority, I decided that perhaps I should be a deaconess.

My application was accepted, but the year I was to go, the rules were changed to require graduation from college first. So, I stayed at TLC and graduated. Next, God led me into public school teaching after I had married a man I met at Camp Lutherhill, La Grange, Texas.

In my 21st year of teaching, the Holy Spirit came to me while I was singing in my church choir loft. What a Sunday morning that was! We began singing "Here I Am, Lord" and I fell backward — fortunately, into a chair. I couldn't sing. I couldn't move. I could only listen and obey! Women were being ordained by then, and it was very clear to me that my time had come to go to seminary. So, into my 22nd year as a teacher, I retired from the Texas public school system. My grown children supported me with blessed assurance. When speaking at various community gatherings, I would openly be questioned about being a woman in the ministry. I would agree with their confusions, explaining that I didn't understand either — how God could call women. But here I am.

The seminary years were filled with the usual challenges plus much, much more. I was scammed. I had car problems. I was put in unusually difficult situations as a hospital chaplain. I was given no credit for the seminary program of courses, so I was required to take the entire four-year program. It didn't matter that I had an M.Ed. in education and psychology and hours toward a doctorate in affective education. Not even the 22 years in public school education were considered. I was to do every requirement of

the four-year program. I loved every class I took, though. So, jokes on my curriculum planners.

Hospital chaplaincy gave me new insights and confidence. I retrieved dead preemies from the morgue so parents could properly say goodbye to their lost child. I humored an old nurse who had summoned me to the morgue to view body parts, hoping to rattle me. I kept a mafia head's large family from a great fight in the hospital. I helped a girlfriend of a gang leader, who had been seriously shot, to quit throwing herself against the walls of the hospital, and I raced with the doctors to see who could get there first to "blue-light" emergencies ... even on my 36-hour shifts. I was 52 years old, and my body didn't like this routine. But it is amazing what God can do in our weakness. Glory be to God always!

Living in three different places in Austin, another during chaplaincy in Houston and another during my intern year was difficult, especially for my four cats. On one of the moves, after my husband had had enough of my calling and divorced me, I had to move my piano and all that I owned into a little apartment. The movers dropped my piano on some foreign students' sports car. I could go on and on, but you get the gist.

Austin's homeless were important to the seminary — and going out in the dark to find those that needed food was interesting. Also, the woman who surprised me by sleeping in the trash container outside my apartment window humbled me more than I could ever say.

One of my friends was an Episcopal priest from the Virgin Islands. After she went back to the islands, we lost track of each other. I found out that the men priests did not accept women priests and would intercept her mail. Once, I mailed her all kinds of Sunday school



books, etc. I found out she had never received them when I finally was able to contact her on the phone.

My intern-year director was a person who had gone to TLC with me. He, of course, was in the pre-theological department. It was a grand, large church; 37 confirmands in just one of the three classes. The radio broadcasting at early service and the television broadcasting at second service were a surprise — literally.

When I was back at seminary my senior year, a political refugee was fleeing from drug lords in his country. He had run for president on the Christian Party ticket, and he was up against the candidate of the drug lords. He lost and somehow ended up undercover at the dormitory where I was staying that year. He went undercover as a person studying to be a priest. In the library he would check to see how many of his friends were being killed off after he had escaped. It was a dangerous time for him and for all of us at the seminary as well.

My first call to a parish as an ordained pastor was to a very God-centered church. The people were and, I'm sure, still are true to Christ. But I came to the vineyard late and so retired as I was turning 65, worn out from teaching and preaching.

God also called me to be a hospice chaplain after retirement for a couple of years. Having one foot in this world and one in the next was exhilarating. Now moving and building a nice little home at my daughter's place, I am writing and enjoying retirement. So far God hasn't called me out of my lovely comfort zone. However, until

I am called home, I look at life with my heart and live in the promises of Christ Jesus.

Dear God, our Creator, our Savior, our Comforter, please be with all who seek out the sight of their hearts. What we see with our hearts we ask for you to interpret through discernment. Then help us to move ever onward into a response to and for your love. In Jesus' name, amen.

Beverly A. Blackman, retired ELCA clergy, ordained June 10, 2000, and former Texas public school teacher.

Making a Difference



When I started seminary at Iliff School of Theology in 1979, I'd never met a woman in ministry and I wasn't officially a Lutheran! I started out just wanting to learn more about "spirituality" to help with counseling. Evidently, the Spirit had other intentions, and with a guiding hand, I soon found myself on the M.Div. track. After graduation and a year of being a "licensed" pastor in the American Lutheran Church, I returned to school at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in order to be "certified" by the faculty and was ordained into the ALC.

As a woman in ministry, I have had far more positive than negative experiences, but I'll never forget the first day of my first pastoral position. I walked into the smoke-filled office and found three men leaning on my desk, puffing away, just waiting to put this new woman in her place. God still works miracles, and over time these same men became staunch supporters of my ministry in their congregation. From this beginning in 1983, as a licensed pastor in the ALC, to a



unanimous call as pastor of a congregation in Salt Lake City, to a specialized ministry call as a Veteran's Administration chaplain, and to supply in retirement, I have found ordained ministry to be a wonderful, grace-filled adventure.

One of the most hopeful and encouraging experiences from my ministry happened while I was pastor at Mount Tabor Lutheran in Salt Lake City. It was the summer of my fifth year in the congregation. One of the young boys, who had grown up in the congregation while I was the pastor, had just returned from vacation in Ohio with his grandparents. The following conversation was overheard between Zach and one of his Sunday school classmates: "While we were on vacation, we went to church with Grandpa and Grandma. And guess what! They have a man pastor. Boy, they sure do things different in Ohio!" Thanks be to God for moments like this that make ministry wonderful.

Times have certainly changed in the ELCA. It is wonderful to see the continuing commitment to inclusion for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Benediction (attributed to St. Clare): Live without fear: your Creator has made you holy, has always protected you and loves you as a mother. Go in peace to follow the good road, and may God's blessing be with you always. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Rev. Carol West, retired, ordained June 30, 1985.

Raising Young Feminists in the Church



A story from my ministry that stands out happened just this last summer. My confirmation group (consisting of five eighth-grade girls) decided they wanted to continue meeting over the summer on Zoom, because of a lack of other activities due to Covid-19 and because they like to see each other. I told them that was fine but that they'd be in charge of leading our hour together each week. These strong young women, whom I've been working with since they were in third grade, were eager to take on this task.

Their topics varied. The first youth led on the topic of "hope," sharing Bible verses that helped her to keep hope in difficult times. The second youth led on the topic of "love," again sharing Bible verses and ideas of how to keep love for others even when you disagree or don't get along. Then, the third youth stepped up to lead, and her topic, she proudly proclaimed, was "feminism." She had us all read together the Story Bible versions of the story of Ruth and the story of Esther and, then, had us look at the text proclaiming that in Christ "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female" (Galatians 3:28).

Our discussion that afternoon about feminism in the Bible and within the church was profound. We talked about how there aren't many stories of women in the Bible. One of the other girls in the group counted the pages in the books of Ruth and Esther, exclaiming in frustration how they were so few in comparison to the rest of the Bible. Then, another girl asked a question that has been resonating in my heart ever since: "Pastor Gretchen, do you think that God is angry at the men who wrote the Bible that they included so few stories of women?" With shivers running

down my spine at the profound innocence and amazing truth of her question, the other girls and I all agreed that God probably was mad at this startling omission.

It is striking to me that these young women saw the few stories of women sprinkled throughout the Bible and knew in their hearts that this didn't mean that God cares less for women or for them. They were able to see that the lens of the Bible often prevents stories of women from being brought forward, and they were angry about that. They are passionate about their inclusion in the church and in God's story of the world. I am proud that having a female pastor probably helped them to know this truth, and I am so glad that they continue to feel valued by God and by our church. And, I am so excited for our conversations yet to come. These young women are the future of our church and our world, and I am thankful to be in their capable hands.

God of all genders, you bless your people with stories of your past faithfulness throughout our Bible texts. May we rejoice with you as Miriam did, may we weep with you as Mary and Martha did, may we continue to share your loving care as Lydia and Dorcas did, may we be your disciples always. When we reach out to you, as the woman with the hemorrhage reached out to Jesus, we know you will not turn us away. Lead us with your Spirit into a future of care for your flock of all colors, genders, sexualities, ages, abilities and backgrounds. In the name of our Savior, Jesus Christ, we lift our prayers to you. Amen.

Gretchen Rode is a self-proclaimed feminist and a pastor at House of Hope Lutheran Church; she lives with her wife, the Rev. Jill Rode, and their precocious cocker spaniel, Petunia, just outside St. Paul, Minnesota.

"Yes, I can. Watch me!"



When I was in junior high, my home congregation, Holy Nativity Lutheran Church in New Hope, Minnesota, called Pastor Susan Thomas as an associate pastor. I wish I remembered more details of her teaching and preaching, but her presence and example have always been there for me. The first time someone tried to tell me, "You can't be a pastor because you're a girl," I knew I could, because I had seen Susan Thomas do it. To his denial, I said confidently, "Yes, I can. Watch me!" Twenty-two and a half years ago, I was ordained.

May God help each and every person know that they are loved, understand that they have been given gifts the world needs, and find ways to share those gifts with the church and the world.

Pastor Kari Parsons, ordained July 11, 1998, currently serves Christ the Servant Lutheran Church in Montgomery Village, Maryland.

The Gift of Baptism



I have been blessed to baptize dozens of people during 34 years of ministry. The largest number at one time was five. During clinical pastoral education at the Medical College of Virginia in Richmond, I baptized a tiny newborn who was hooked up to many tubes and expected to soon die. A nurse in the neonatal ICU kindly gave me an eye dropper that I used to baptize this infant in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, as her tearful parents looked on. Decades later, while serving St. Andrew's Lutheran Church in Easton, Pennsylvania, I had the opportunity to baptize a 76-year-old man

together with a newborn child. I will forever remember the picture of him gently holding the child after the rite, their bald heads still damp with water and foreheads glistening with the oil that had been traced in the sign of the cross.

Laura Csellak was ordained on Oct. 26, 1986, at her home congregation of First Lutheran Church, West Palm Beach, Florida by Bishop Royall Yount, having graduated from Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia that spring.

Fifty Years Ago and Today: Ordination of Lutheran Women in the United States



I write this in the context of today's global pandemic, of alarming natural calamities, of an upsurge in various protests against systemic inequalities and of 50 years of women pastors in Lutheran churches in the United States. These may seem to have little in common, but they have come together and reached a crescendo in 2020. The impetus began some years ago but is surging upward today.

Fifty years ago, I had become increasingly aware of movements for justice. I graduated from college and was present at conventions of two Lutheran churches (the Lutheran Church in America and the American Lutheran Church) as they changed policies to begin ordaining women. I had started seminary, sustained especially by other women ecumenically, as together we challenged male bastions of power, language and imagery.

Almost all of the women ordained in the early 1970s were white; systemic racism persisted then and now. We were appointed to and had

some access, sometimes as tokens, in ways our male colleagues did not. The ordained ministry was becoming less hierarchical. We were mostly white and well-educated, and were considered radical "women libbers" for daring to do so. We were viewed suspiciously, not only by male holders of power but also by many of the women who came after us.

As the first Lutheran woman to serve as a parish pastor in the western two-thirds of the United States, I experienced many awkward moments as I entered spaces where ordained women had not been before. One of them was in the congregation I pastored in Oakland, California, where Anna, a faithful older Russian Orthodox woman who lived nearby, regularly attended and even communed. After a couple of years, she spoke to me in a confessional mode. She had harbored resistance to my being "her priest" because of the strong taboo she had about a (possibly) menstruating woman being behind the Communion rail. She confessed that relating to me as a person had caused this taboo, through the Spirit, to be shattered. "I now accept you to be my priest," she proclaimed.

In the 1970s women pastors connected with each other, which enabled seeing, remembering and acting in collaboration with each other. We entered ordinary life and engaged religiously skeptical folks in ways that previously were unlikely when clergy were all male and set apart. We often identified with and were in solidarity with those who were really different or who remained excluded. We entered lives and arenas that had previously been closed to clergy. Ground was being prepared for the incredible onrush of women who now are leading in new ways.

Today, women pastors are increasingly common, visible and diverse in their locations, identities and views — although in mainline Protestant churches, most are still white. Many

first have had other careers and jobs. Many are now elected to be bishops; on Zoom I recently witnessed two female bishops ordaining a former student. Fifty years ago we were seen as rare anomalies who didn't quite fit in. But what is seen in many places is that women pastors are increasingly common and "normal." "Pastor" no longer needs to be modified by "woman." It has become the new norm.

Karen L. Bloomquist is a theologian-at large living in Oakland California, and Whidbey Island, Washington. Most recently she has taught at Wartburg Seminary, and before then at other seminaries in and beyond the United States, as well as directing theological work for the LWF and the ELCA.

Finding the Words



I was raised in The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, and I spent half of my childhood on the campus of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. Pastors were everywhere in my family. Both my grandfathers were pastors, one a missionary to India, the other a parish pastor. I had uncles on both sides of the family who were pastors, one of whom served as a LCMS district president, another a Navy chaplain, another who worked overseas for Lutheran Bible Translators. My father was a parish pastor before he became a professor of church history. As I grew up, immersed in Christendom, it never occurred to me that I could be, or should be, a pastor. And yet...

I remember a heated discussion with my third grade teacher, Mrs. Williams, about a finer point of the Apostles' Creed. I remember pulling out a hymnal to prove my point.

I remember the positive affirmation I received from my confirmation teacher,

which never included an encouragement to rostered ministry.

I remember being encouraged to become a director of Christian education (DCE), an acceptable option for a woman who showed theological aptitude and gifts for leadership in ministry.

I remember not mentioning to my extended Missouri Synod family at our annual reunions that I was taking seminary classes. When it became known, more than one relative asked, "But this is just for your own education, right? You're not planning on becoming a pastor, right?" And then, as my education continued and I realized that, yes, I would apply to candidacy and, yes, I would actively pursue an M.Div. and, yes, I would seek ordination (all with my parents' approval and support), I finally owned up to it, not only to my family but also to myself, finally embracing my own understanding of what I was being called to become. ... That, yes, even a girl could become a pastor. And then, at the reunion before my senior year of seminary, another cousin asked the question "Why do you have to become a pastor? Why isn't being a DCE good enough?" She was a strong woman of faith, a youth leader and musician in her Missouri Synod congregation. And I answered, "Why do you have to be a musician? Why do you have to be a teacher and lead the youth? Because God has gifted you and called you to be all that you are, and to use your gifts for God's work. I am the same, but I feel called to lead as a pastor."

At that same reunion, my grandfather finally understood that I was on course to finish seminary and become ordained. I know he loved me, but he expressed concern for the



church that he also loved; after all, women had been ordained for only 30 years or so (at that point), and it was too soon to tell if they were a blessing or doing damage. I give thanks for my uncle, the LCMS district president, who sat down with my grandfather to discuss his concerns. At least at that point, I didn't have the words, and whatever else I needed, to answer him.

I did find the words and the fortitude during the interview for my first call. A member of the council was from the Apostolic Lutheran tradition, which does not ordain women. As the council members took turns asking questions, whenever it was his turn, he began with a Bible bullet that he would zing across the table by way of question introduction. Paul, Timothy and more were launched from his battlements. I had always avoided conversations with people who were interested only in telling me how wrong I was and why. But in this situation, in this very first interview for my very first call, I needed to find the words. And as his potential future pastor, I needed to engage him and his concerns in a thoughtful way that did not dismiss the whole argument as "agreeing to disagree." It was good for me to articulate my sense of call and consider the Scripture he chose to bolster his arguments from a perspective that included the whole context of Scripture and the more particular witness of Jesus and the women that Scripture records were active leaders and evangelists in the early church.

I was called to that congregation and accepted. It took only a few weeks for me to feel with certainty that I was exactly where I was supposed to be, doing what God had called me to do. I wonder sometimes whether

I would have gone to seminary sooner if I had received encouragement at an early age. But I do not regret the experiences I had prior to ordination (youth director, parish worker, JC Penney salesperson, substitute teacher, marketing researcher, YMCA day camp counselor, worship leader, etc.). Every experience helped prepare me for the varied tasks and challenges of ordained ministry.

Now, as a bishop, I find that the challenges are different, and nothing is certain in these pandemic days. But God's call remains, as does the effort to "find the words" in the face of disagreement, hostility and conflict. As the church is made new, I pray we will come together with renewed clarity and strength of purpose, and that church will become even more than it already is, a gathering of individuals blessed with a living, active, mighty faith that freely and frequently finds the words to invite others into a relationship with Jesus and encourages people to be their best selves for the sake of Christ in the world.

*The Rev. Katherine Volz Finegan
Bishop of the Northern Great Lakes Synod*

I graduated from Valparaiso University with a degree in English and secondary education in 1987. I began taking classes at then-Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary in 1990. However, in June of 1991, my family's situation changed. I took a hiatus from 1991 until January of 1995, during which my husband and I welcomed two sons, and I considered whether or not I would return as an M.Div. student in candidacy. From January 1995 until my internship in 2000-01, I took one class a semester and took one semester off to have another son. I was ordained in July 2002 and called to serve in the Northern Great Lakes Synod at Bethany Lutheran, Republic, Michigan. I was called to be the assistant to the bishop in 2012 and elected bishop in 2017.

Seen, Heard, Known



In the summer of 2018, I began my yearlong internship experience. A child of the congregation asked his mom a genuine and sincere question: “Are pastors only girls?”

He was five years old, and all the pastors in his life had been women. He wasn’t questioning the authority of women in the church but honestly wondering about the pastors he knew. What a delight it was to hear this question of openness and curiosity, to witness one of the ways the church has more fully lived into the love and reign of God over the last 50 years!

I hold onto this question when other experiences challenge my role as a pastor and faith leader. There are days when I’m told I look like I’m 13 or called “kiddo,” when parishioners and colleagues would rather not understand my perspective as a woman. On these days, I remember how this young one fully accepted me as a pastoral leader without regard to my age or gender identity. I remember how his faithful questioning helped me to feel seen and heard for who I was. I remember the delight and joy in his voice as he called me Vicar Melissa.

I continue to hope that the young ones will lead us in accepting and lifting up the leadership of not just women but also people of color and folks in the LGBTQIA+ community. The Holy Spirit is certainly at work among us, and I pray that it won’t take another 50 years for us to wake up to her presence and calling.

**Come, Holy Spirit, with your wind and fire!
Awaken us, stir us, raise up among us leaders
of all kinds to testify to your abundant love.
Amen!**

Pastor Melissa Woeppel was ordained on July 15, 2019, and currently serves as pastor at Lutheran Church of the Living Christ in Florissant, Missouri.

“We’re getting one of youse at our church.”



When I graduated from college in 1968, Lutheran women were not pastors — not quite yet — and so I never even considered it. I was quite active in campus ministry at University of Wisconsin–Madison. The closest I knew of a fellow female student with aspirations for full-time ministry wanted to be a “pastor’s wife.” To my way of thinking, that seemed to be the wrong way round — a vocation, certainly, but surely not a goal in itself. Over the next 30 years I found myself being drawn into greater and greater leadership roles in my congregation, anything to help the mission and ministry of the church. But I knew I could never chant the liturgy, and I was sure I could never preach, not until my pastor asked me to fill in for him and preach on an upcoming Sunday. Well, if it would help out ... And I discovered that I liked to preach. And it also turns out that there is this wonderful role called the assisting minister that can handle most all the chanting. So eventually I applied to Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary and went part-time for 10 years. I used to joke I was the first student with “ten-ure.” In that time the curriculum changed twice, and finally they had no idea what courses I needed to take to graduate: “Take one more New Testament class and fill out the rest of your credits with electives.”

My first call, in 1999, was to a rural Finnish congregation in the Northern Great Lakes Synod, one of those wonderful parts of the country where Lutherans are “dense.” There were four ELCA churches in our town of 7,000, plus six other brands of Lutherans. I was the first woman pastor for miles around, the fourth in the cluster and the first pastor in the congregation’s 100-year history to stay for more than three years, perhaps because I didn’t see it as a stepping stone to something else.



One of our treasured events was an annual pie social. People came from all the surrounding towns for the ladies' homemade pies. When I had interviewed for the call on the phone with the bishop before I came for the in-person interview with the congregation, he had told me, "They are Finlanders. They will love you, but they won't tell you that." A couple of years into my call, a short-in-stature, shy bachelor from a neighboring Lutheran congregation came up to me at the pie social. He stared down at my feet and said with a strong Finnish accent, "We're getting one of youse at our church." I'd been there long enough to know the courage it took for him to come and speak directly to me, and I also knew he meant it as a great compliment. And sure enough, before long I was there at Bethany Lutheran Church in Republic, Michigan, for the installation of Pastor Katherine Finegan, now Bishop Katherine Finegan of the Northern Great Lakes Synod.

By the time I left that call in 2010 to be closer to family on the West Coast, women clergy were on staff at nine of the 15 ELCA congregations in our cluster. My only "goal" has always been to serve God and neighbor, stand tall, walk humbly and listen well, speak out even when my voice shakes, and not let any of "youse" down.

*The Rev. Virginia Elizabeth Tredon Eggert, retired
Willamette Lutheran Retirement Community
Keizer, Oregon
Oct. 14, 2020*

She was the strong voice of the church—generously proclaiming encouragement and support.



Going to seminary was not even something I dreamed was possible. I grew up in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, and becoming a pastor was not an option. As a young college student attending Pacific Lutheran University, I wept the first Sunday the Rev. Susan Briehl presided at worship. I had not realized other Lutheran denominations ordained women as pastors. Over the next several years, I felt God calling me to ordained ministry. Feeling excited and a bit uncertain, I went to seminary.

During my first week of classes, I received in the mail a little pink envelope addressed to me. The neat, familiar handwriting warmed my heart. It was a letter from my best friend, Kristi. Kristi and I met at church when we were three years old. I was a very shy child who did not want to go to Sunday school. Spying me in tears across the narthex on Rally Sunday, Kristi took me by the hand, told me not to cry and announced to both our startled parents that she was going to take me to our Sunday school classroom. During class I had to go to the bathroom, but I was too embarrassed to ask. Seeing the puddle on the floor under my chair, Kristi once again took me by the hand and led me to the bathroom. Before opening the door, she informed me the bathroom fan was really loud but I didn't need to be scared. I wasn't alone. She was with me.

She was true to her word — not only that morning, but also throughout the years that followed. Even before opening it, the pink envelope in my hand offered me that familiar reassurance. I didn't need to feel afraid. I wasn't alone.

Seeing New Possibilities



I didn't know what was possible until I saw it.

My formative denomination did not ordain women, so I never saw a female pastor. Baptized at 15 in Virginia, I immediately plunged into congregational life and ministry, present at my church anytime the doors were open. On any given week I spent 19-26 hours at my church. There was Wednesday-night prayer meeting, followed by choir practice; Thursday-night visitation with the deacons; Friday-night youth Bible study; Saturday-morning bus ministry (taking the church bus route to confirm whom to pick up tomorrow for Sunday school); Saturday-night campsite ministry (passing out bulletins and inviting campers) and the Sunday-morning, 7:30 a.m. campsite service; then Sunday-morning bus ministry (picking up Sunday school kids), then Sunday school, morning worship, then evening Training Union and evening worship. My parents were divorcing, after which my father returned to Puerto Rico. The church became my family. The adults were closer friends to me than my peers. Nevertheless, the closest thing I could envision to being a pastor was becoming a pastor's wife.

In college in Virginia in 1975 I met a female United Methodist pastor. That turned my world upside down. I had seen it. It was a possibility, and there was no question what I had to do. I started visiting different churches and after several years came to rest on the Lutheran church out of a growing appreciation for liturgical worship and because numerous theologians whose thought I admired (Tillich, Bonhoeffer, Thielicke) were Lutheran. I began the endorsement process after already starting Union Theological Seminary in Virginia.


When I opened the letter, tucked inside was a letter with encouraging words of support and a check. Kristi was delighted to report she was hired for her first "real" job as a college graduate. She had not yet found a church home and informed me she was sending me her tithe — not only that month, but she was going to support me financially throughout seminary.

Every single month for the four years I attended seminary, a little pink envelope addressed to me with that neat, familiar handwriting arrived in the mail. Every single month there was a letter of encouragement. And every single month there was a check — her tithe. Even in my seasons of questioning and doubt, her commitment was unwavering.

I cannot tell you how much Kristi's faithful and generous support meant to me and still means to me. Her monetary gifts made a huge difference. Yet, even more importantly, she was the strong voice of the church generously proclaiming encouragement and support. When I was ordained as a pastor, I wanted her beside me and asked her to present me for ordination.

My prayer for you, dear friends, is twofold. First, in your seasons of learning and discerning, in your seasons of questioning and doubt, that you have someone take you by the hand and speak with the unwavering voice of our faithful God, proclaiming, "Do not be afraid. You are not alone." And second, that you can be this friend to someone else. God bless you!

The Rev. Beth Utto-Galarneau was ordained in 1993 and has served congregations in California and Washington.



After my first year and a CPE residency, I transferred to what was then Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. The Swedish and Norwegian jokes initially flew over my head. That experience gave me an understanding of Lutheranism's roots and an appreciation for Powdermilk Biscuits and A Prairie Home Companion. But the singing and harmonizing of my African classmates (many from Zimbabwe and Tanzania) raised the hairs I didn't know I had on my soul. I was grateful to Bishop Herb Chilstrom (bishop of what was then the Minnesota Synod of the Lutheran Church in America) and to the many professors at Luther Northwestern Seminary who affirmed my bilingualism (English-Spanish) as a needed gift in the Lutheran church. I was further affirmed during my membership at Mt. Carmel Lutheran Church, with Pastor Fred Ringham, and during my internship year at Grace Lutheran Church in Anoka, Minnesota, working with Pastor Steven L. McKinley as my supervisor. Steve encouraged the meetings with pastor colleagues in our pericope study group, whose collegiality was another positive experience. By the time of my seminary graduation I had received a letter of call to Iglesia Evangélica Luterana Emanuel in Bayamón, Puerto Rico. I was ordained at the Convention of the Minnesota Synod (LCA) in June 1985 at the chapel at Gustavus Adolphus in St. Peter, Minnesota. I was happy to be ordained with 11 other classmates at the synodical worship service. My internship pastor and congregation surprised me with a luncheon at a restaurant nearby. I was very touched. Given the geographical distance (and theological stance against women's ordination) of my family, it had not even occurred to me to invite my

family to the ordination. Having the folks from Grace Lutheran celebrate the occasion with me was very affirming. In addition, the pastor from my congregation, Mt. Carmel, invited me to celebrate communion the following Sunday, my first time.

When I was installed at Iglesia Luterana Emanuel, my father came to the service. Afterward he explained the tears in his eyes during communion: "It never occurred to me that one day I would receive communion from the hand of my daughter." Well after his retirement I had a conversation with the pastor of the Southern Baptist congregation of my youth. He told me he had long held to the thinking that women should not be ordained, but my life in the congregation and my witness had caused him to reconsider the issue. He was in his 80s. I appreciated that affirmation of my call and ordination, and the change in thinking, I'm sure, did not come easily to him.

Years later, in a Brooklyn, New York, congregation, a couple with their little toddler boy had moved to New Jersey. On their return visit a few months later, I was nearly tackled at the chancel by their son. They confessed that finding a new congregation was becoming a challenge, as their son was insisting the pastor HAD to be a woman!

While in the Metropolitan New York Synod I served on the synod candidacy committee, and in subsequent years I lamented the loss of talented seminarians and faithful pastors throughout our church who either had left or were forced out because they would not rule out the possibility of receiving as gift a committed same-gender relationship. In the congregation to which I now belong, both my pastors are married to same-gendered spouses. The wheels turn slowly, but they turn, thanks be to God.

The last 17 of my 35 years of ordained ministry were in hospice chaplaincy, where for the most part my gender was not an issue to the patient or family. They taught me about the profundity of sacramental presence in end-of-life care. However, I retired at the end of February, on the cusp of the COVID-19 pandemic.

You don't know what's possible until you see it.

If I'd never seen that UMC pastor I would not have known what was possible. But in recent months I've seen the Holy Spirit pouring herself out on all flesh in new ways, and revealing new possibilities: my younger colleagues making communion bread online, navigating Zoom worship and social media in ways that make me dizzy but give me hope.

Where the Spirit takes us remains to be seen.

Holy Spirit, bring wisdom and strength to all who seek to sing the Lord's song in foreign lands, in new and unimagined situations. Help us to see new visions and dream new dreams. Open our eyes and hearts to what is possible.

Nitza Rosario-Rodríguez was ordained in 1985. She served parishes in Puerto Rico, New York and Indiana, and most recently served at Rainbow Hospice and Palliative Care in Park Ridge, Illinois. She retired this year.

It All Started at Age 15



It all started at age 15 at a Luther League leadership school; it was a sermon from the verse "Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I; send me!'" (Isaiah 6:8). But it started much earlier, say at 9 years, when

my mother would get out of bed every Sunday morning and drive me to the nearest town, where I went to Faith Lutheran Church by myself. The small church enfolded me in its arms, took me in; families asked me to sit with them; the young pastor was welcoming and supportive: I was in the Junior Choir, then the Senior Choir; I taught Sunday school; I led the youth group (Luther League) at our church and district-wide. So when I came home from leadership school in 1957 and told my pastor I felt called to full-time work in the church, his response was "I'm sure there will be a place for you." And there was ...

I started first as a parish worker during a year break between junior college and university. Then, while at the university, I spent two summers as a summer youth director for ten Lutheran churches in Seattle; after my Master of Religious Education degree I created a youth street ministry for the same churches. It was 1968, woman's ordination was two years away, but I had the wrong degree. So what next? I was recruited to be a campus minister at Washington State University, then Eastern Washington University and finally Skagit Valley College. It was OK if I was in a town where students could still get to a church for the sacraments. But something was missing. I would counsel students preparing for marriage, support unwed mothers and help students with deaths in their families, but I never got to follow through and perform their marriage service or family funeral or baptize those who had come to faith in the campus ministry.

As the only woman in ministry around, I was often asked to do pulpit supply. I relished the opportunity to interpret the Scriptures for



whatever group would ask and didn't mind that I was being used as the token woman and also the campus minister who might consider topics a parish pastor would steer away from. But my heart longed to share God's love with people at important turning points in their lives: baptism, marriage, death. What to do? I was geographically isolated from a Lutheran seminary (husband was a Washington state patrol officer), no online courses were offered in those days, but a group from Seattle requested help from Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in Berkeley, and for 10 years I took the offered course each year. With the help and support of family, pastors and professors, and my unfailing faith that God was my guide, I was able to be ordained in 1984.

I was called to a congregation in a small mountain community that had never been served by a full-time pastor. They were gentle with me and helped me learn the ropes. They opened their hearts and let me love them and care for them in Jesus' name. When it became apparent that I was the college fund for our two children, I needed a full-time call, and in 1987 those were not easy to find. I accepted a team call because they needed a youth director at a large congregation. It was a great learning experience, as I got to minister to many more people, I got to

hear two other pastors preach, and I was stretched in my faith and professional life. But finally, at 50 years of age, I was called to pastor a medium-sized congregation in a small town, which was a great fit for their needs and my abilities. We, my husband and I, became part of the community as well as the church, and we settled in for a good long ministry of loving and trusting one another in Jesus' name. After retirement, an Episcopal

Missionary church enticed me to serve with a priest half-time; it was a marvelous way to close out 25 years of parish ministry. The church now is a federated Lutheran-Episcopal congregation.

It all started at age 15, and what a ride it was; it was never easy, but I trusted that God had set me on this path for a good reason and that God would be with me each step along the way. If you feel called by the Holy Spirit to serve the church full-time, do not dismiss the call; give it time and lots of prayer, and seek the guidance of others who have answered this call.

May our Creator God guide you to see the gifts you have been given and the faith to answer the call of the Holy Spirit. There are so many opportunities to serve as a witness to Jesus' love. What is the call you have received to serve in your church, your community? May you be guided by the word of God and your loving, supportive friends in Christ. May God bless you all your days. Amen.


Sandra Bowdish Kreis is retired. She graduated from Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in 1984.



WWJD?

A few years ago WWJD? (What Would Jesus Do?) was all the rage. There were bracelets, T-shirts, postcards and bumper stickers with the acronym. It spurred some lively debate and some funny parodies. (What would Jesus drive? A Honda — because the disciples were of one accord. Acts 2:1.)

As I studied the texts for Reformation Day, I was drawn again to Psalm 46, which inspired Luther's great hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." It is also a psalm that grew near



and dear to my heart because of my Grandma Minda Johansen. As you can guess, I was named after my Grandma Jo. She immigrated to the United States from Norway around the turn of the last century (1900s, not 2000s). She was born in Norway; lived in Eau Clair, Wisconsin; and got married at the age of 30. Since my mother was her last child, born when she was over 40, I always felt kind of fortunate to even be here.

Grandma worked in the county register of deeds office, was president of the League of Women Voters, was the 1975 Aberdeen, South Dakota, Mother of the Year, served on a Housing and Urban Development committee responsible for building a number of affordable housing units for senior citizens (I believe she was in her 80s by that time) and had been a volunteer at our home church for many years. Grandma was a natural teacher. I am in my core, my heart of hearts, Lutheran due to her tutelage more than my confirmation class.

Grandma was 96 when I was ordained. Her son-in-law, my uncle and my cousins (all Roman Catholic) made sure she was in church that morning, even though a blizzard was brewing. My pastor told me a story about my grandma after the service. The previous year my home church had celebrated a major anniversary. It had challenged members to tithe for two years in honor of the big event. Each person who tithed was represented by a yellow construction-paper doll that they had gotten retired members to cut out. Grandma had been one of the volunteers. Grandma had told the pastor she was going to tithe, but she wouldn't sign the pledge card, because at her age there was no way she could be sure she would be around for the full two years.

About six months later, Grandma had a light stroke and entered a nursing home. I learned a few things during the next few months. Grandma's copy of the Lutheran arrived in her mailbox a day or so before mine arrived. Grandma read it thoroughly, and I could expect to be asked about the articles when I came to visit. I also learned a lot more about what was going on in my home church from Grandma than from my mom. Every pastor was evaluated not only on the content of their sermons but the clarity of their delivery over the radio.

At age 98 Grandma became a naturalized citizen of the United States. She had been covered by my grandpa's naturalization from long ago, but there was a crackdown on illegal aliens and no one could produce grandpa's papers (he had been dead for over 40 years), so Mom filled out the paperwork and someone drove out from Pierre, South Dakota, to swear her in.

I was at the synod assembly when my home pastor mentioned that Grandma had gone blind. It was three months before she turned 100. Her sight had gone overnight, although it was not totally unexpected. I was devastated for her, and I made it a point to visit soon afterward.

How does one visit with a grandma who has treated me as both pastor and grandchild for five years? We prayed and talked. I asked Grandma if I could read anything for her. She asked for Psalm 46. In a trembling voice, I started. "God is our refuge and strength" After I started the tenth verse, "Be still, and know that I am God!," Grandma stopped me. "That's it! That's the verse I wanted." I may have been devastated, but Grandma took her latest setback in stride. She could be still because she knew God was watching over her.



As I face the trials and tribulations of the present day, I sometimes wonder what Grandma Jo would think about the present political standoffs or this round of racial and religious tensions. But I don't have to ask, "What would Grandma Jo do?" I know, she would be still and know that God is God.

Dear Lord, no matter what we face, help us to trust in you. Amen.

Pastor Mindy Jo Ehrke, '85 M.Div. from Luther Northwestern Seminary, St Paul, Minnesota; ordained March 3, 1985; pastor, Lyman County Parish in South Dakota.

me that my Spanish Catholic husband had to convert become a Lutheran or they wouldn't ordain me. I changed church and went to teach in Israel.

Third time around, the next bishop's office wrote me that they needed Spanish-speaking pastors and would ordain me. I changed church, country and language, and went to serve a bilingual Latino congregation in New Jersey for 25 years.

At our last service together, Reformation Sunday 2019, we all danced. Resurrection happens, always.

Go in Peace! But go! ¡Vaya en paz! ¡Pero vaya!

Birgit Solano Richante, born in Northern Germany; studied theology in Vienna, Munich, Zurich; taught in Germany and Israel; ordained in the United States Reformation Sunday 1994.

Three Strikes, and You Are In



When I was 9, my mother died and was buried next to our village church. Our pastor asked my grieving father to help renovate the old Romanic building. It was a dark and crowded place. They removed century-old additions, decorations and pews; reopened windows and doors; painted the walls white. After one long year, when we entered the church again, it was a light-filled space — your view led beyond the altar into the cemetery, garden and trees outside: Resurrection Church.

When resurrection can happen to buildings, can it not also happen to us? I didn't have the words yet but found them later. Resurrection is always possible, and I am called to witness. I didn't know what a call journey this would be. First time around, our bishop's office wrote me a letter saying I shouldn't study theology; they wouldn't ordain women. I changed churches and went to study. Second time around, the next bishop's office wrote

Of Beginnings and of Endings



When I was about 7 years old I received my first Bible. It was produced by the American Bible Society and had a list on the back cover entitled, "Where to find in the Bible ..." On evening I was sitting at the dining room table looking at the Bible and said to my mother, "I want to become a pastor." She said, "You can't." I said, "Why not? Where does it say that in the Bible?" She could not answer me. Unfortunately, she was right at the time, for in the 1950s Lutherans were not ordaining women as pastors.

Fast forward some 50 years, 50 years during which God led me to eventually enter and complete seminary training. While I was

awaiting a call, the bishop asked me to be the pastoral care provider for a small — a very small — congregation in Cementon, on the outskirts of Allentown, Pennsylvania. At the most we would have seven at worship, including the organist. The youngest member of council turned 80 shortly after I arrived. These were good folk, very faithful folk who cherished their past but knew that at some point they had to face the future.

Since the congregation had once been a union church, with United Church of Christ services one week and Lutheran the next, when the UCC congregation disbanded, the Lutherans continued to worship every other Sunday. On the alternate Sundays some members attended other churches, and they had done so for years. In order to make ends meet, the congregation had also been renting the building to an independent congregation that would come in when we were done with worship.

After I was with the congregation about 18 months, council members decided that no one of them wanted to be the one to “turn out the lights” at St. Paul’s. As painful as it would be, they wanted to do it together. They finally decided to sell the building to the independent congregation so that it would remain a church. Some of the members decided to join the congregation where they had been worshipping when we did not have a service.

Then came the decision of what to do with their remaining funds. Everyone, Delores in particular, dreaded that. It would make everything seem so final. She anticipated being really upset and wasn’t sure she could make it through the meeting.

After much discussion and reminiscing, members identified a number of organizations and decided how to divide the funds so that the mission of the congregation could continue. I’ll never forget Delores’ words when we finished.

“Now that was fun!” she said. “That was fun!” She had experienced that it was a delight to designate how the funds would be used, funds they had worked so hard to raise and conserve over the years. Through the sharing of prayer, memories and discussion, God’s Spirit had helped these faithful folk to discover the joy of entrusting their funds to those who would carry on God’s mission, carry it on within that community and far beyond its borders. It was also a relief to have all those decisions made.

Members of St. Paul’s, Cementon, taught me a lot. At the time when I was just beginning my pastoral ministry, they let me experience that joy of seeing God’s kingdom advance, even while facing the ending, the closing, of their congregation. This witness to how God’s Spirit works through painful times helps me to speak words of hope to those who face difficult transitions in life and ministry! It reminds me to look for the ways that God continues to show God’s self to be a God of resurrection, a God always helping the church to reform.

O God, you are a God of surprises. Your call to service takes many twists and turns and evolves from moment to moment, year to year. Guide us through the various seasons and challenges of our life with the assurance that even what seems like an ending may actually be an opening to new life. In the name of Jesus, the Resurrected One, we pray. Amen.

Ruth F. Doty. Born in 1948, I attended Valparaiso University, married and raised children, worked as a marriage and family therapist before and while attending Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, and served as the Lutheran Disaster Response coordinator for the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod for 10 years before being ordained in 2015.



“I never knew that women weren’t supposed to be pastors.”



I grew up in an ELCA congregation in northern Minnesota. While growing up, I never knew that women weren’t supposed to be pastors. I was born and baptized in 1982. We ordained women starting in 1970. I was very active in my home congregation my whole life since my mom was the church organist and choir director. I was a part of the choir when I could only cry. My pastor saw a gift of public speaking in me. He asked me when I was in sixth grade if I would read the Scripture lessons. I gladly accepted. This started me not only being the lector but also the one praying the prayers and assisting with communion, among other more normal ways youth served in the congregation as an acolyte and usher. I believe my pastor and other members of the congregation expected me to be a pastor very early on. I was encouraged to go to a Lutheran university, but I was a three-sport athlete and wanted to continue playing them in college. The Lutheran universities weren’t going to allow me to do that, so I went to a small public university. I played my sports and received my B.S. degree, but even more importantly my call into ministry was fostered through campus ministry and Lutheran congregations.

I was involved in Campus Crusade for Christ (now known as Cru). It had a different theology from the Lutheran church I grew up in and attended in college, but I loved the enthusiasm for Jesus they had. I hadn’t experienced that before in the Lutheran congregations. The leaders and other students, though, didn’t believe women should be pastors. During spring break of my senior year in college I was with Campus Crusade for Christ on the beaches of

Panama City Beach, Florida, to evangelize to students on the beach. One of the Lutheran congregations that helped pay my way to Panama City Beach had a female pastor. She was very supportive of me in my discernment about ministry. One day during the trip, I was going to write a thank-you note to the congregation and her specifically for their support for my trip after I left the beach for the day.

As I was on the beach that day, a classmate came up to me and asked how I justified myself going to be a pastor since I was a woman, and the Bible says women should be silent and not teach. I didn’t have a good answer as I was struggling with that myself. How do I justify my strong call to ministry and believe the Bible? I went up to my room to start writing the thank-you cards, and as I wrote the card to the pastor who was female, I realized that since there are other female pastors, that’s part of the reason I can justify myself becoming a pastor. Somehow other women and the church justified it, so I decided to go to seminary. I then learned biblical interpretation, theology and church confessions that would not only justify women being pastors but also welcome and encourage us.

Dear amazing Lord, thank you for the women in our lives that witness to you. Jesus, the first people you spoke to after your resurrection were women, and you called them to tell others about you being alive. Encourage us to continue to tell others about you and your love. In your name we pray. Amen.

The Rev. Ashley B. Nicolls was ordained on Oct. 10, 2007, 25 years after her baptism on Oct. 10, 1982. She has served St. John Lutheran Church in Summerfield, Florida; Concordia Lutheran Church in Superior, Wisconsin. (the same congregation she mentions in her story about the church with a female pastor); and St. Andrew Lutheran Church, Whittier, California. She currently serves St. Paul Lutheran Church, Sarasota, Florida.

Surprised by the Call



I grew up in a church family. My grandparents were faithful members of their Lutheran congregations in east central and northwestern Ohio. My parents were equally faithful members of their Ohio and Minnesota congregations and in their work, at various times, for the national church. I can't remember a life without a deep connection to congregational life and an equally deep sense of the broader church in all its diversity.

My family told stories about my childhood theological discussions (isn't it fun talking about God and things?). I knew from an early age that I, too, would be a "church person." But, unlike some of my colleagues who, when saying "I want to be a pastor," were told, "Women can't do that," I don't remember ever wanting to be a pastor or being told I couldn't because I was a "girl." I do remember being thrilled with the 1970 decisions in the American Lutheran Church and Lutheran Church in America to open ordained ministry to women. But that wasn't where I saw myself.

I was passionate about the role of laity in the church. Thanks to my mother, many family friends and even more stories about women (and men) who lived out their vocations in the church and the world, I knew God had a place for me as a layperson — as a missionary and a public school teacher, in campus ministry and as a parish associate.

While working full-time in a congregation in Michigan, I came to the realization that I wanted to study theology, and I was smart enough to realize that reading on my own just wouldn't do it. I needed a disciplined theological education. But, still,

the goal was not to become a pastor, rather to deepen my faith and to become more effective in my calling as layperson.

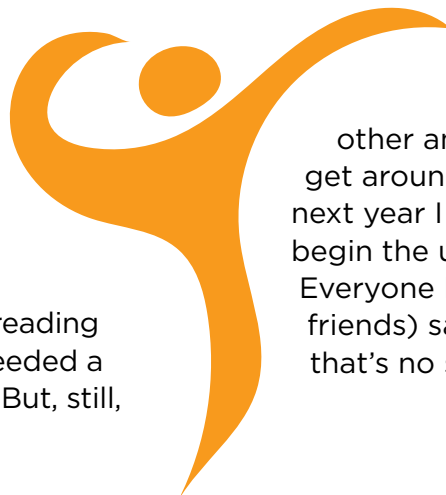
Then it happened. While the pastor was on vacation, two members of the congregation died, one had major heart surgery, several others had adult siblings diagnosed with terminal illnesses, and I seemed to spend nearly all my time in hospitals, funeral homes and pastoral conversations.

After the first of those deaths, the widow shared the news of her husband's death and thanked me for my visits while he was hospitalized. Then she made me her pastor — the one to speak to the funeral director, to make the necessary arrangements at the church, to plan and lead the funeral. She became the instrument of God's calling.

I came away from that time believing I was called to ordained ministry but being embarrassed by what I was feeling. I didn't want to tell anyone. I was afraid my new sense of call would be interpreted as a statement that only the ordained could minister in times of death and grief. I knew that wasn't true, but it seemed hypocritical for a passionate defender of the ministry of the laity to now express a desire to be ordained.

When, a couple of weeks later, I went home for vacation, I told my parents (with a great deal of verbal hesitation) that I thought I might "go talk to someone at the seminary."

My parents looked at each other and then said, "We figured you'd get around to it sooner or later." Over the next year I prepared to enter seminary and begin the unexpected journey to ordination. Everyone I talked with (references, pastors, friends) said, in one way or another, "Well, that's no surprise!"



But it was a surprise to me. Now, 45 years later, I remain grateful for that surprise and for God's continual surprises in my journey of life, work and faith.

May you be blessed in all your callings — expected and unexpected — with God's grace, purpose and peace.

Karen G. Bockelman has served the church as a layperson and a pastor (ordained 1979) on the mission field, in campus ministry, as a parish pastor, and on synod and churchwide staff. She is always grateful for God's surprises.

"I felt something like longing stirring within my soul."



My path to ordination was a long journey with many twists and turns.

I grew up in a denomination that I loved, whose official, longstanding policy was that God called only men to ordained ministry. This is the community of faith I was socialized into from a young age, and I had no reason to doubt that what I was taught was true.

Over the years, I sensed God's call and looked for ways to serve. I became a nurse and considered joining a celibate religious order, but that did not suit me. Eventually I fell in love, married and had children.

My husband is a Lutheran. For the first several years of our marriage, we practiced our faith ecumenically, attending one another's churches every week. Eventually I became a Lutheran, not because I had come to dislike my church of origin but because we had a

daughter. I knew that there were women being ordained in the Lutheran church. I wanted my daughter to have full flexibility in discerning what God might call her to be. Shortly after I joined, we experienced the ministry of a female pastor for the first time. I heard a woman preach; I participated as a woman celebrated Holy Communion. And, without my asking, friends invited me to attend ordinations of women. I felt something like longing stirring within my soul. These were the seeds that were sown.

In those years, while immersed in the vocations of nursing, marriage and motherhood, I explored life as a Franciscan and, through a three-year process, eventually was professed as a Third Order Franciscan in The Episcopal Church. In another three-year course of study, I became a certified spiritual director. Yet another course followed, this time as a labyrinth facilitator.

Yet, something always seemed to be leading me onward. Unbelievably to myself, I was feeling drawn to study for ordination. But that seemed impossible. My early education in the faith made it seem unlikely at best. Moreover, the seminaries were all too far away for me to attend while raising three kids still in public school. I reasoned that it must not be a real call from God if it were impossible to act on; either that, or perhaps this was not the right time.

One day, as the kids got older and more independent, I traveled to San Francisco to sit with a group of Franciscan nuns, members of the Community of St. Francis (the celibate branch of the Franciscan family in The Episcopal Church and a sister order to the one I belong to). We sat together in a circle, and I asked them to share their call stories. I made it clear that I did not want to join them but that I wanted to understand their discernment and how they had come to arrive in that life. One by one, they all said the



same thing: “I tried this thing and I tried that thing, and nothing felt like I had arrived at my call until I came to this place.”

This comment spoke to me loud and clear. I realized that I needed to listen more closely to the call to seek ordination. I had “tried this and tried that,” and the one thing remaining was still calling to me. I finally accepted the very real possibility that God was calling me to ordained ministry. If God was calling me to leadership in the church, then it was time to talk with the church about it! This inquiry bore fruit immediately. Both seminaries I applied to accepted me, and I was also accepted into candidacy with the synod. When one of those seminaries began to offer distributive learning for those of us at a distance, all the barriers came down. It took a long time, but I was ordained as a minister of Word and Sacrament in the ELCA at the age of 60.

I believe that someday women will be fully accepted in all Christian denominations as people whom God may call into service through Word and Sacrament ministry. I am grateful that other women paved the way for me to come to a clearer understanding of call, and that the church was willing to listen to the wind of the Spirit blowing through the churches, always making us new. Soli Deo Gloria!

Rev. Christine Cowan, TSSF (Third Order, Society of St. Francis)

*Pastor, Immanuel Lutheran Church, Ogden, Iowa.
Ecumenical Accompanier, fall of 2011
World Council of Churches Ecumenical
Accompaniment Program in Palestine and Israel*

Opening Horizons



I grew up attending a little white-framed, rural church that sits past the intersection of two gravel roads, surrounded by cornfields and hay, in the rolling, wooded hills of northeast Iowa. Unbeknownst to me, two experiences there in the late 1950s, when I was about 9 years old, affected me deeply and would later be identified as “first formations” pointing me toward entering ordained ministry. Of course in those years such ideas were not even possible for little girls. Certainly we were not even encouraged to dream about such things, and the closest to it a little girl might wish to become was a missionary!

Fortunately for me, one particular summer Sunday evening I met such a woman, who had come to speak at our annual ice cream social. Her elderly parents were members of our congregation, and she was home on furlough, sharing her experiences that night of serving as a missionary nurse in South Africa. While I must admit we kids were more interested in winning footraces down the newly installed cement sidewalk than in sitting still to learn about a far-away country we’d never heard of, still the night’s events remain vivid in my memory, even today! For as the evening closed and we prepared to leave, standing beside the unique items she’d brought along, my parents also introduced me to her. Even then I knew there was “something special/something different” about this woman, and it set my mind to begin thinking “what if?” as my mind slowly began to open to new horizons beyond the known realities before me!

Those were also the days of a church organization for elementary students called Junior Lutherans. Much like the big kids’ Luther League programs it provided a monthly opportunity for us children to gather for

worship in a “kids’ church” style, complete with little red chairs and little green hymn books. On one particular Saturday our leader, a gray-haired elderly woman who led the Sunday school program for 20-plus years, asked if any of us had ever thought of becoming a missionary. To this day I remember my thoughts and feelings, struggling to decide whether to raise my hand for it — after all, I had thought about it! But as my little arm began to go up, I looked around and, not seeing other arms going up, started to lower my arm, considering that I really was way too young to commit my life to something; especially sharing it, in public, on such a “spur of the moment”! Still, I had thought about it, and I did now have some idea of what that might mean! And furthermore, I knew God knew my heart and my thoughts about this already so — I might as well be truthful! Right? So, slowly, with much uncertainty, my arm began to go back up!

About 30 years later I was ordained into pastoral ministry of our ELCA, at that same little country church. Interestingly, my internship and first ministry call were to a unique cross-cultural and cross-denominational setting among Lutherans in the southern Black Hills of Edgemont and developing a new Lutheran mission frontier working together with the historic Episcopal congregations on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, both of them in South Dakota. This ministry planted seeds for what today flourishes as the Lutheran-Lakota Shared Ministries in Pine Ridge. My clergy husband and I accepted our third ministry call to his home country of Colombia, in South America, serving together a Lutheran congregation in southern Bogotá. In a roundabout way my earliest thoughts of working with and for God’s people in a missionary-like way had, by God’s grace, become realities! Yet equal if not more important in telling this simple story of a little girl’s fulfilled dream of ministry possibilities is knowing that God

can take an adult’s innocent questions and comments, addressed to little children, and use them to plant “seeds of possibilities,” shaping them in ways neither of them might ever have imagined! Yes, thanks be to God for such grace-gifts to all of us; gifts both given, received and given again!

Good and gracious God — We give you thanks for the mysterious and grace-filled ways you continue to stir within the hearts and minds of your people. Thank you for those folks whose simple words and questions continue to plant seeds of faith and encouragement in little ones, expanding their horizons of new possibilities beyond what they may ever have believed was possible. Bless our children and our elders, and all who are in between, that together we may be faithful to your callings. Amen.

The Rev. Barbara Wangsness (Lizarazo), Wartburg Theological Seminary — M.Div. 1988.

She Hugged Me – Embraced by a Calling



On April 18 and 19 of 1975, 42 women seminarians from nine seminaries and seven ordained women gathered at Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago to acknowledge the fifth anniversary of the Lutheran Church in America’s decision to allow the ordination of women. Nine representatives of the national church office participated in parts of the gathering. This gathering was the brainchild of several middler (second-year) and senior women at LSTC. I was a lowly 22-year-old junior (first year), but since there were so few of us at LSTC we all got pulled into the planning. The six objectives were clearly outlined. The budget was established at

\$1,400. Two mailings were sent out, and then we waited. What a joy it was to receive the responses. While there was some very limited money designated for transportation, most of the cost was borne by the women themselves. Six women came from as far away as Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary. Everyone was housed in our apartments at the seminary. We ate at our own expense, a lot of cheese and crackers, chocolate and wine.

The gathering was bare-bones, but it was glorious. At the first activity, to hear strong women's voices singing together in worship against the backdrop of a chapel where most often we were drowned out by hearty baritones and basses was in itself empowering. We had wonderful addresses and powerful sermons from the women already ordained. Of course, the gathering had its critics. "If we are supposed to be one church, why do these women need to have their own gathering?" (Subtext: What are they plotting or planning?)

A lot of good things came out of that gathering for me. I learned I was not alone in having to defend myself at every turn for wanting to enter "the ministry" as an ordained clergyperson. We were all answering the questions and concerns of our family, friends, seminary professors, candidacy committees and selves. "What will you do if you get married?" A particularly knotty problem for me as I was engaged to an American Lutheran Church seminarian. "Whose career will come first?" "What will you do if you get pregnant?" And "what will you do with children?" A lot of the questions that women across professional lines were facing at this

time in our culture but still needing to be answered.

Then there were the assumptions: "You're just doing this to prove you can." "You'll probably cry at funerals." "The men will all leave the church if it becomes a 'women's thing.'"

More challenging were the concerns that we had no control over. "What if no congregation wants to call you?" "What if no synod will pick you up?"

Some very helpful strategies came out of our "bitch" sessions. We learned to talk about the "special gifts" that ordained women would bring to the church. (I won't even expand on that; you know them as well as I do.) We challenged each other to "get out there," to be the flesh and blood example of a woman in ministry. We encouraged each other with the story we had to tell and empowered each other in its telling.

To that end, I found myself eventually supply-preaching at seven rural congregations in Minnesota and many around Illinois, where I was the first woman to lead worship. I accepted almost every invitation to speak at a women's circle meeting, lead a youth event, address a mother-daughter luncheon or even go to an all-male Lions Club meeting. A friend of mine referred to it as "trotting out the dog and pony show."

So it was that this friend and I were invited to speak at a meeting of the Dorcas Circle at our teaching parish site. The Dorcas Circle included the oldest ladies of the church. They still conducted their meetings in Swedish, and I think perhaps that's why many of them came. (In private my friend and I referred to them as Q-tips; older ladies with cottony white hair. How hard it is now to look at the Q-tip I face in the mirror every day.)

They were very gracious and cordial to us as we trotted out our “dog and pony show.” They even spoke English most of the time and served delicious Swedish coffee cake and coffee after the meeting. I remember the event so vividly because as it was ending one of the very older ladies came up to me. We chatted a bit, and she said to me with tears in her eyes, “I am so very happy for you. I wish I could have done what you are doing.” Then she hugged me.

Those words have formed the very basis of my ministry. I regularly think of all those women of faith who did not have the PRIVILEGE to be able to preach the gospel, share the sacraments and be invited into the most tender moments of people’s lives on the basis of being the church’s representative of the love and mercy of God. I have thought of those women, their strength and courage and endurance, at the lowest points of my ministry and at the highest, and I have given thanks for them. When I have been discouraged and tired, I have tried to remember that ministry is a privilege and not a burden, an opportunity and not a cage. I have tried to remember that I am only a small but valuable part of God’s continuing work in the world.

Gracious God, we give you thanks for strong, resilient women of every time and every place who work with compassion and mercy for justice and truth. Amen.

I am Christine Nelson Meyer, ordained in 1978. I am retired now after 42 years of service in four calls and 26 years on the candidacy committees of two synods while being married 45 years and raising three sons.

Are You Ready?



I grew up in a congregation that started as a children’s center — Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Greensboro, North Carolina. Because of this it was bursting with young people. So many we had three “youth groups” — something like the YUPS, YCAPS and something else. Though my memory fails me, I am sure those were acronyms for something. The young were not integrated into the church. We were the church. We served in all aspects of church life, which is why I believe I preached my first sermon at age 9.

My pastor, who was ordained that same year (1979), was the first African-descent woman ordained in any Lutheran church in America, the Rev. Earlean Miller. She took me into her office after asserting in a youth group meeting, “Absolutely. CeCee could preach.” I remember sitting in there feeling so small as she gave me three books to help me craft the sermon. I remember thinking, “Well, if Pastor Earlean says I can do it, why not?” I don’t remember the words or the text, but I remembered the feeling — pure possibility.

The first memorable sermon happened when I was 12. It was memorable mainly because I spent several years afterward trying to erase it. Here is why. Though I don’t remember the text, I do remember the title and the excitement I felt when I created it — “Are You Ready?” I remember the “run” I created for the ending as I challenged people to be open to the ways God would call and use them. It went something like ... “Are you ready? Who knows what God is calling you to?” I pointed to someone. “God could be calling you to be a teacher.” I called someone by name. “Or God could be calling you to be a lawyer. Are you ready?” I looked toward someone else. “God could be calling you to be a writer. Who knows? God could be calling me to be

a pastor. Who knows, but are you ready? Are you open to go and do what God is calling you to? Are you ready?" I felt so good about the rhythm and the question I ended on — the sermon felt complete and finished. I hoped it had caused people to think about their sense of call. And actually, there seemed to be a unified understanding of my sermon. They heard loud and clear and repeated for years, "CeCee wants to be a pastor." To which I responded for years, until the memory of the sermon had died down, that I had said "Who knows?" not "I will be."

It wasn't until much later, when I was a 28-year-old single mom working for the United States Postal Service, that things became clear. I had many opportunities to preach at Prince of Peace, my home congregation, even into adulthood. It was a congregation that celebrated and uplifted lay preaching. I remember coming in one Sunday and discovering I was preaching that day. I had 15 minutes to prepare, and my mom had called the church to ask me to come by and pick up her offering as she was not coming to church. I remember saying, "I can't, because apparently I am preaching, and I need to read the Scriptures for today."

So that continued opportunity to preach kept happening, but it was not until

I was working at the postal service that I got a glimpse of pastoring. I served as a shop steward for the union. Since I had previously imagined myself answering the call to be a lawyer this gave me an opportunity to serve as an advocate over a legal bargaining agreement. It involved writing up the case to an arbitrator, reviewing witnesses and making an argument with evidence, witness statements and citations. I

believe it was God's way of giving me the opportunity to feel how it might have felt if I had pursued that sense of call. It also gave me a glimpse of something else.

Often when I would get an employee with a case, the conversation turned to matters of faith — even including a person of the Muslim faith I represented to get management to honor their prayer rituals. Many times, the conversations would spill into my personal time. They would call me or meet with me during nonwork hours about their faith and relationship with God. Some who saw me reading my Bible on breaks would ask questions or request prayer. I was finding I enjoyed that more than anything. I began to feel my sense of call to public ministry.

One day the director for evangelical mission at the time, the Rev. Hank Boschen, took me out to lunch to discuss an issue at Prince of Peace. After we finished, he looked at me and asked, "CeCee, have you ever considered being a pastor?" My heart lit up, the Holy Spirit did leaps inside my belly, and my face almost cracked at the sheer wideness of my smile. I responded immediately and enthusiastically, "Now that you mention it, yes, I do feel a yearning for public ministry." He smiled back at me and said, "Well, once you retire from the postal service, you should definitely do it." He was quite the pragmatist and was being thoughtful of my financial stability, but God had something different in mind. Pastor Boschen connected me with the Rev. Beth Kearney to begin a discernment process into public ministry. It has been a wonderful journey, filled with hills and valleys but never a flicker of doubt about my call to God's work through pastoral ministry. I



celebrate all who have accompanied me in this journey, but especially in this season I humbly celebrate the witness, wisdom and encouragement I received from the late Rev. Dr. Cheryl Pero.

May God make plain the call on your life and give you the strength to enter the storm. Amen.

The Rev. Lucille “CeCee” Mills was ordained as a pastor in the ELCA on March 20, 2004, and currently serves as the associate director for evangelical mission in the North Carolina Synod.

Words to My Younger Self ...




It is the 1950s. You sit in the backseat of the family Ford, thumbing through Golden Books while your mother goes from house to house, knocking on doors. You don't know it yet, but she is modeling a deep devotion that will help shape you and your vocation. Because there was no Lutheran congregation in the town where your parents settled, your mom asked the synod if one could be organized. You are too young to understand it all, but you will witness your mother inviting neighbors to a new church start-up, hosting interest meetings in your home, and teaching Sunday school when the congregation finally begins to meet at the YMCA. Passing on what has been handed down by her mother, aunts and grandmother — all the way back to ancestors in eastern Slovakia — your mother taught you early on to proclaim “Jesus Loves Me” in song, to participate in weekly liturgies and daily bedtime prayers, and to prioritize sharing time and gifts with Christ's church. This will become the norm of your beginning life.

So it should be no surprise that you will want to play church the way other children play school. Sometimes you will succeed in gathering a live congregation of extended family, who will listen to you preach from the banister of your grandma's house. More often, you will line up your dolls and stuffed animals, lead them in worship, baptize several in the bathroom sink, and yes, prepare for them Holy Communion wafers by tearing up toilet tissue. When asked “What do you want to be when you grow up?” you will quickly and confidently answer, “A pastor!” And you will mean it, without any consideration of the barriers or challenges you'll face.

It is the 1960s. Your home congregation now has its first called pastor and a newly built home. God continues to use it as an incubator to nurture your faith. Despite the approaching insecurities of adolescence, you will feel a sense of belonging there; and you will still hear a strong call to share your gifts — just not all of them. You will certainly be given a place in the choir and welcomed to assist your mother in teaching VBS and Sunday school classes. But you will never be asked to serve as an acolyte or encouraged to consider a church vocation, and you will begin to understand another norm. The only ones wearing liturgical gowns on Sunday are male; and while you may have entered the Kingdom of God with your child's play, the church of the grown-up world ordains men only. This will be hard for you to accept, even as it is difficult to watch your brothers play Little League baseball from the fence that keeps you off the field. But don't lose hope. As this decade comes to its end, you will study at a college affiliated with the United Methodist Church, and you will befriend a woman planning to go on to seminary and ordination. You will feel that strong





stirring once more to serve Christ's church as a pastor. When you share that with your pastor back home, you will be told again that "unlike the Methodists, Lutherans do not ordain women." But you will not be discouraged. You will wrestle with your calling, even if it means leaving the Lutheran church to respond to it. Have no fear. God has another plan.

It is the 1970s. You have just completed your sophomore year of college, and the Lutheran Church in America has voted to ordain women! The same pathway has been opened to you as to those male candidates around you, discerning a call and pursuing a ministry of Word and Sacrament. Prayers and interviews, the endorsement of the church and a welcome to seminary will follow. You will have the affirmation of many in your family, your circle of friends and those whom you will eventually serve — but not all. Even your beloved grandma, whose stairway became your first pulpit, will tell you, "A pastor should be a man!" Try to understand the perspective of those who disagree, love them anyway and stay true to your calling. In short, to the best of your ability, prepare and do the work of a pastor faithfully. Know you will be blessed with supportive teachers, friends and colleagues, there in the spirit of Christ to accompany you. (One from seminary will become your husband!) You will be ordained on a May Sunday in 1976 before the New Jersey Synod. As a new pastor, you will feel your heart pound with overwhelming joy as you distribute the sacrament to convention worshipers. Later that day you will be honored at a reception given by your home church, the mission congregation your mother helped to develop, and you'll realize that, though not herself a pastor, your mom served as your role model in many ways.

At this reception, you will also be given a set of stoles and a book of prayers, signed by your brothers and sisters. These you will carry with you throughout 40-plus years of pastoral service in Christ's church. Along the way, you'll add the title "mother" and try to pass on to your four children the precious gift inherited from the women whose faith first inspired you. Serving your vocation, you will know successes and failures, joys and sorrows, seasons of awesome wonder and times of agonizing doubt. And then, one day you will find yourself on the roster of retired pastors, not knowing how it all passed so quickly yet grateful for every privileged moment.

Not everyone gets to be what they want to be when they "grow up," young Beth; but for now I encourage you — and others discerning their baptismal vocations — to face every barrier, every challenge, with faith and thanksgiving. Simply grow as God's beloved child, and know, by God's grace, you always will!

Holy God, we give thanks for the saints who ministered to us and for the ministries we are given to share. As your Spirit goes before us, always to prepare the way and call us forward, give us childlike wonder, humble obedience and bold confidence to respond. Through Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

Submitted by the Rev. Dr. Beth Spitzner Neubauer, All Saints Day, 2020. I was ordained on May 23, 1976; pastored parishes in Maryland and Virginia; served chaplaincies at Gettysburg College and with the United States Army Reserve National Guard, Washington, D.C.; shared as adjunct staff and faculty at the Lutheran Theological Seminary, Gettysburg (now United Lutheran Seminary), and at Palmer Divinity School, Eastern University; and continue to enjoy my ministries as wife, mother, grandma and supply preacher!



"I am grateful for the women who paved the way for me."



My mother died when I was 24, just two years before my ordination at 26. Not having her physically present at such an important day in my life was beyond difficult and not just because having a supportive family by our side on such an important day is natural. In 1986, when I was about 5 years old, my family moved from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to Marlton, New Jersey (a Philly suburb), and my parents decided it was time to find a new church. Both of my parents had been raised Roman Catholic and even attended RC high schools in the city but no longer felt like the Roman Catholic faith matched their beliefs. My mother especially wanted to find a church where women were lifted up as leaders and not limited in their participation. They visited a few churches, but when they came upon Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Marlton they discovered a wonderful church that was led by a pastoral team that included a female pastor. It was the first time my mother had encountered women in leadership this way, and she knew that this was where she wanted to join. My mother wanted me to know that I could be anything and for the examples around me to demonstrate that as much as possible. Prince of Peace was, and still is, a wonderful congregation in which to grow up and become a leader. When I felt the call to ministry as a teenager my Mom was excited for me and supported me every way she was able until her death.

In the summer of 2001 my mother and I traveled to Indianapolis for an event celebrating women leaders in the ELCA. It was being held in correlation with the 2001 ELCA Churchwide Assembly in the same city that month. The event included workshops,

speakers and a dinner, and all focused on women in leadership within the ELCA. We were both excited to be there and to meet other women who felt called to lead the church. At one point we were at a banquet and I was introduced to Addie Butler, then the vice president of the ELCA, as well as Bishop Margaret Payne of the New England Synod. It was a thrill to meet these women who were leading the church in such important roles. They encouraged me in my studies at Valparaiso University and were thrilled that I was planning to go to seminary and be ordained to serve in the church. My mom was so impressed that we were able to meet women who were so important to the church that she could not wait to tell everyone at home.

These memories are precious to me not only because I miss my mother so much and would love to have her ear to chew on days when ministry is just plain hard but because they remind me of her amazing support and love for a church that she came to later in life and that gifted her with opportunities she had never imagined. I am grateful for the women who paved the way for me and so many others to lead in this church. This anniversary year is a wonderful opportunity to reflect on these stories and remember how much I have been shaped and nurtured by women in the church.

Thanks be to God!

*The Rev. Annemarie H. Cook
Pastor, Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Maple Shade, New Jersey
ELCA New Jersey Synod
Ordained Sept. 16, 2007*



Hebrews 12:1



Mom. Nana. Great-Gram. Great-Aunt Emily. The women. Three generations with whom I shared my church pew week after week, season after season, year after year. At first they offered church toys and Cheerios as I padded stocking-footed between their knees; later they pointed out the words so I could follow along as we stood to sing; and much later they blended their soprano with my alto in the harmonies of the church. I watched as they sang, prayed and followed each other to gather 'round the table of grace.

All are long gone. Yet, they were and remain numbered among my “great cloud of witnesses.” Dad smiled across the chancel from the choir “loft,” but it was these four who were my steadfast example of “living in the presence.” Among them there was no advanced degree (in fact only one high school diploma), no high-powered career, no political office. But there was confidence — deep, unshakable, abiding belief in “Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.” That is what set me on the path to ordained ministry; their example is what reminds me daily to run with perseverance whatever race God has set before me.

Holy Parent, Name above all names, bless and hold tenderly all those who lead another to you. Let them be graced with the assurance that in you is the way, the truth and the life. Amen.

Though the Rev. Linnea B. Wilson, ordained in 2000, has retired from congregational ministry, she has rewired as an active volunteer in her church and civic communities.

Called in Community



I was the first woman to be ordained in the North Pacific District of the American Lutheran Church (the second to serve in that district) and the 14th in the ALC. When other women wanted to talk about their call to be pastor they were sent to talk to me! My conversations in those early days were the beginnings of a career-long participation with people in candidacy, and I retired in 2017 from a synod staff position in that area. Listening to people's call stories is fascinating and enriching. It also emphasizes how the call to ordained ministry is a call from God and the church. Without the community of God's people identifying spirit-given gifts, the call to be pastor does not have any traction at all.

Holden Village is a Lutheran-based retreat in the North Cascades of Washington state. I went there for 11 weeks on volunteer staff in 1971. When I arrived, I had pretty much given up on the church, even with growing up in it and attending St. Olaf College as a religion major. Listening to the preaching of the gospel at Holden, I realized that I had been baptized and there wasn't anything I could do about it. (I'm a walking advertisement for infant baptism!) I did know I could choose to live inside or outside that covenant. It looked like more fun in than out, so there I was. A little later that summer I spoke at Matins, a very brief message at breakfast for the community. I can't remember what I said, but that day more than 30 people came up to me and said, “Your call is preaching.” I entered Luther Seminary the following summer.

At Luther Seminary in 1972 there were 11 women in a student body of 500. My second year, there were 15. When I returned from internship for my senior year, there were 62! There are a million stories about those years,

but one stands out for me. When I was getting ready to be assigned an internship, the professor in charge of that let me look at the site applications. In those days they were asking pastors and congregations if they would take a woman as an intern. On some of the forms “NO!!!” had been written so hard the pen had torn the paper. I was glad to be able to select a site that was welcoming to me and all women.

My first call in 1976 was at Holden Village. Several thousand people come to Holden each year, so I learned that the simple fact of seeing a woman preach and preside made a huge difference for the vast majority. In fact, as I’ve been the first woman to preach and preside in many worship settings, my experience tells me that once folk see that the word is being preached and the sacraments offered, it’s just fine. After my first call at Holden, I was without call for two and half years. I served three interims, which allowed for even more exposure to more people for a woman as pastor. During those years, my male colleagues were really good about inviting me to preach and/or preside in their congregations. Sometimes it was when they were gone, but often I shared leadership with them. That was an important visual piece for everyone.

I think that our Lutheran theology, particularly that of the office of the pastor, has allowed women more access to parish ministry as pastors. Although it is certainly important for a pastor and a congregation to be a good match, technically any Lutheran pastor can function in any Lutheran congregation. And, most importantly, preaching the Word and administering the sacraments is not dependent on the personality of the pastor.

So, as I noted above, people welcome both women and men as long as the function of the office is fulfilled.

In this 50-40-10 anniversary year I’ve been preaching and teaching in the congregations of the Northwest Washington Synod about this history. In each place I give thanks for all the congregations and communities that have welcomed women as their pastors. The community affirmation of this very big change in public leadership in the church — do note that 50 years is just a drop in the bucket of Christian history — has made the welcome of women as pastors much easier. There have been plenty of difficulties, and sadly some continue. But the significant growth and change continues as well. The year 2020, with all of its huge problems, has seen the election of women bishops in the synods of the ELCA in unprecedented numbers. I used to say that the door had been opened but the furniture hadn’t been rearranged. I think that is finally changing.

I have had a wonderful career as a parish pastor. It is a very good life. And I thank the communities that have supported me, sustained me and cheered me on, all of these in Washington state: Phinney Ridge in Seattle, where I grew up; Mountain View in Puyallup, where I did my internship; Fullness of God at Holden Village, where I had my first and last calls as a parish pastor, and the entire, wide-ranging Holden community; and the three congregations where I served interims: Prince of Peace in SeaTac, Port Madison on Bainbridge Island, Wooden Cross in Woodinville, and Faith in Seattle, where I served for almost 30 years.

***O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good**

courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Pastor Nancy L. Winder, ordained on July 18, 1976, is retired and lives in Seattle.

**Eric Milner-White (1884-1963) from Daily Prayer, edited by Eric Milner-White and G.W. Briggs, Oxford University Press, 1941, as adapted in Evangelical Lutheran Worship © 2006 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.*

The Journey Began Before I Was Born



It started with an Easter-morning service, a Missouri Synod pastor telling the story of the reason for that season. Propelling me to want more for my children, they needed to know what I was confused about, and I was intrigued.

A new neighborhood we were moving into. Three blocks down, a new church was being built. The stained-glass window that was installed was impressive. Two brown-fisted hands, with a cross breaking the chain. Yes, that would be the place. My 5-year-old son could run to the church. Of course, he was accompanied by me with my one-year daughter in my arms.

A different version of Lutheranism (Lutheran Church in America) I encountered, but the journey into “Luther land” had begun. BUT my journey began before I was even born.


I write this piece on the eve of a service of remembrance for the life and journey of Dr. Cheryl Pero in the company of my sistahs — women (and a few men) from around the

world. We gathered to hear and share stories about our connections with Dr. Pero, who transitioned this past week. In an interesting sort of way, it is because of Dr. Pero that I teach today.

I also write this after engaging in a learning regarding All Saints Day, a day of veneration of the ancestors in one’s personal life — grandparents and great-grand parents — to include their gifts, virtues (and vices) that still live within. It was a day to remember what makes me who I am, who and what forms me. The day before, Dr. Will Coleman, a professor of African history and spirituality, read the lineage of Jesua. Knowing Latin, Greek and Hebrew, Dr. Coleman recited the lineage, and I heard the name Zarai. “Zarai” is also known as “Sarai” or “Sarah,” the name that my mother carries, given to her in remembrance of her own grandmother, Sarah. My mother Sarah is the daughter of Callie, the daughter of Sarah, a woman of mixed race (Dr. Coleman says we have to claim all of our lineage — although I call myself one of the daughters of Hagar). And Callie is the grandmother of me.

In the Hindu tradition, Callie is also known as Kali, the goddess of death. I am seeing that my research, primarily about death and dying, is not by chance. The goddess Kali is also a strong mother figure (my grandmother Callie had 12 of her own) and embraces her sexuality (yes, that’s me — the next iteration of my research is leaning toward healthy sexuality for African American women). Believing that the dead are not gone but are always with me, I know the spirits of Sarah and Callie are within me. In the formation of me, in the woman that I am, in the vocation I have been called into, I bring all of that with me on a journey that began before I was born.

I never wanted to become a pastor. I did not like to speak in public. But educated as a social worker, I did know that I wanted to



be a resource to the community. Looking at this now, I see my mom within me. I remember asking another clergyperson why he was a Lutheran pastor. His response was that white Lutherans were going to be coming into our community and some African American Lutheran clergypersons needed to be there.

So here I am. I didn't want to be here. But I was called to be here. My quiet, introverted self would have preferred to read a book. It is a calling that I still don't understand, but I do believe God knew me, even before I was formed within my mother's womb, and my journey continues.

The calling of being a Black woman in the Lutheran church is not easy. It took three years before I received my first call — and that was a part-time call. Congregations, both Black and white, did not know what to do with this “uppity” yet soft-spoken Black woman.

The time in waiting and the travel that continued helped me to claim my voice. As with the chapter “Hush No More!” in *Transformative Lutheran Theologies: Feminist, Womanist, and Mujerista Perspectives*, I write that African American Lutheran women will “hush no more.” African American Lutheran women, I wrote, embrace a womanist ethic that calls them to a responsibility. That ethic suggests that, regardless of whether this church loves us or not, we have a responsibility. My responsibility, I believe, is to teach (although I think there is more).

The travel took many turns including time to work on my Ph.D. Landing finally at Luther Seminary, as I taught for more than 10 years in

historically Black theological institutions, I teach. Perhaps it is for me to teach from a womanist perspective, using a womanist pedagogy, knowing that there is a difference between schooling and educating. Resistance, of course, exists. That's the nature of ANY system. Learning anew — a surprise. I was surprised to learn of the midwestern culture, that being an immigrant community (something that is often forgotten) brings with it a trauma of being an immigrant and the behavior of a people who have been traumatized — perhaps. Now I don't think my role is to be the translator of what I am observing, but I do feel like I may be called to be an inquisitor and sometimes an agitator, raising my hand and my voice to “hush no more,” raising questions about how liberal is this liberal theological education. And the journey continues.

It was in that church in Queens, New York, with an African American Lutheran pastor that I began to learn in depth the gospel story. It was in my education through the Lutheran Theological Center in Atlanta and then later teaching at the Interdenominational Theological Center that I learned about a theology that would enable me to teach a theology that would take into consideration, race, class and gender at every turn, one that is liberative, transformative and justice-oriented, and one that could be taught EVEN to majority European American Lutheran students.

And it was in my sojourn in this Lutheran church that I would meet Dr. Cheryl Pero and become a part of the Conference of International Black Lutherans, which took me to South Africa, Zimbabwe, Germany, Switzerland, Brazil, Ethiopia and more. With the support too of the ELCA's Justice for Women program I would also travel



to Ghana and Bahia, attending consultations with the Daughters of Africa Atlanta. All of this would shape my calling and how I would use what I had learned to teach for the transformation of a world that I believe God wants for God's people.

This journey forming me afforded me the opportunity to contribute to the ELCA's Theological Roundtable and become a witness to the historical election of the first African American Lutheran woman to become a synod bishop and for a time and a season to become an assistant to the bishop for the Southeastern Synod as well.

Yes, my journey began before I was born. In the years before I landed at Luther Seminary, teaching at a seminary in North Carolina, I also discovered that I had a long legacy of pastors in my family, mostly male, who had attended the seminary where I taught. Who knew? And my journey continues....

For the life of Dr. Cheryl Pero and all the saints that have come before; for the souls that will follow too; to God, who called Black women to a church that is to be reminded of her true roots, formed before ALL of us were born. For the fruits of "our" wombs — the 10 years, 40 years, 50 years and years to come — we ask, dear God, your blessing, trusting YOU know where the river is deep and you will uphold us so we will not fall.

Dr. Beverly Wallace is the associate professor of congregation and community care at Luther Seminary. She was ordained in May 1999.

Two Generations: From Mother to Daughter



I turned 50 years old in 2020. That means that women have been ordained my entire life. That was not true for my mother, who went to seminary in the early 80s, when I was in middle school. She probably would have gone to seminary right out of college, but that was not a choice she could make when she graduated from Texas Lutheran College in 1966. Instead, she majored and then mastered in music education and choral conducting and had an incredible first career as a composer, music teacher, church musician and church and community choir director.

In 1980, my mother decided to attend seminary at the Lutheran Seminary Program in the Southwest in Austin, Texas. She needed to learn Greek and Spanish, so she spent a summer learning Spanish in Mexico, and she took me to learn with her. During her time in seminary, she and my father started a Spanish-speaking worshipping community at the church where my father was the pastor.

After my mother was ordained, she interviewed at a congregation where she was asked, "So what would we call you? Pastorette?" Eventually, my parents took a joint call to start a mission congregation in South Dallas. I helped them in this endeavor by doing many tasks such as making coffee, laying linoleum in the bathrooms, folding bulletins, teaching VBS, initiating a teen group and serving as the hospitality person at every worship service. I also remember hearing my mother answer the phone at church, where someone would ask, "May I speak to the pastor?" She would respond, "You are speaking to one of the pastors." Then they would respond, "No, I mean the real pastor."

Thanks to the women (and men) who went before me, my experience going to seminary was very different from my mother's. I, too, graduated from Texas Lutheran College (now University), but I was encouraged to go to seminary by professors and the campus pastor. I was also recommended for a scholarship to attend Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. After I graduated, however, my first call had some initial challenges. My husband, also a pastor, received his first call back in Texas in 1997. When I began the interview process at several congregations in 1998, my interview questions were very different from the ones my husband had been asked. One of my favorites was "What will happen if you get pregnant?"

When I was called to my first congregation in 1999, I was told not to have a child until after my term call was over. And at one of my first church council meetings, the president welcomed the new "chick pastor." Although I took this in stride, I never would have earned his respect if I hadn't called him on it in private. Now I serve as a senior pastor at a congregation in Houston, Texas. When I first arrived, a family left because I was a woman. Since then, I have rarely experienced gender bias. Just recently, like my parents, I have helped start a Spanish-speaking worshipping community at my church.

I don't know what I would have done without both of my parents, but especially my mother as a role model for ministry. There have been so many things I've needed to discuss with her over the years — things personal and professional. I also needed the mentoring provided by so many male and female professors, pastors, supervisors and colleagues. Last but not least, I am so thankful for my husband — for his understanding, his sharing in household roles and his listening ear.

Gracious and loving God, you have created each one of us and placed us in the care of

families, congregations and communities. We give you thanks for all those who have supported us in the development of our gifts and callings. We also give thanks for those who have had to struggle and pave the way for those of us who follow. Open the hearts of all so that the gifts given to your people might be used to their fullest potential. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

*The Rev. Dr. Nancy Maeker was ordained in 1984.
The Rev. Dr. Beth Warpmaeker was ordained in
May 1999.*

The Unexpected Blessings of Being a Pastor



All the years that I have been able to make memories, I have known women leading my church home and preaching from the pulpit in rural Cannon Falls, Minnesota. I was two when pastors Heidi and Lon Kvanli came to Spring Garden Lutheran Church and 12 when pastors Cindy and Nick Fisher-Broin began their calls. My gender has never, ever been the reason I doubted or wrestled with my call to ordained ministry. I remember being in college and someone wondering about my call to ministry because I was a woman. They might as well have been speaking Dutch, because I literally had no idea what their words meant or how my gender made them wonder that. Seriously, no idea.

In retrospect, I know what a gift this was — not just for my own sense of call but for all the girls and boys who grew up along with me at Spring Garden. We know only a world where women and men are leaders, and I cannot help but see that as significant as we talk about how important it was that God showed up in the flesh. Our God became incarnate through

Jesus, and that means that our flesh, our bodies, are important too. The more diversity we see in our leadership, the more we see the in-breaking of God's kingdom before our eyes and the more we see that we have a part to play in God's kingdom coming too.

I realize this sounds a bit "rose-colored glasses," and while I love Spring Garden very much, I know it is not a perfect church filled with perfect people. I also know that my pastors and I have faced difficulty being women in leadership. But I am so grateful to have experienced nothing but joy and support from my home church and my family.

The experience I had at Spring Garden is not unique. There are 50 years of stories of kids like us, many of whom are well into adulthood and some even AARP-eligible, who grew up with women as pastors. For multiple generations there have been kids in the ELCA and predecessor bodies who have grown up without the false idea that gender was a qualifier for call. Sure, the number of kids who experienced that started small, but it grows more and more each year. And I do not just mean the call to ordained ministry — but to all the calls we have. I look at my church friends, and we all became strong women who are leaders in our respective careers, nurtured by our family and our church. And as time goes on, stories like ours will be not outliers but the norm.

It can be problematic that the church world I grew up in is different from the church world I often find myself in. But that is another story for another day. This day is a day of gratitude. There are many unexpected blessings to being a pastor — none that I hold quite so dear as little girls who are a pastor when they play dress-up and who jump at the opportunity to be up-front during worship. They baptize their cats, make their way to the front of the church to lead prayers with me, read Scripture

in front of hundreds with more bravery than many adults muster, gather their family to play worship service around the summer campfire, and lead prayers when they're barely old enough to read. Best of all, they will never once wonder if their being a girl minimizes their opportunities to live out these God-given gifts.

God of all grace, we give thanks to the women who have come before, who have been faithful to your call no matter the barriers in the way. We look with excitement and anxiousness to the next years — for generations now and yet to come, who continue to be proclaimers of your Good News. To you be all glory and praise. Through Jesus Christ, our Savior, we pray. Amen.

Pastor Cassie (Sauter) Anderson, ordained in 2011, currently serves Peace Lutheran Church in Fargo, North Dakota, and lives in Moorhead, Minnesota, with her husband, Pastor Jake, and three children.

Let It Be!



When I think about my formation as a pastor, two closely linked occasions come to mind: the time I felt called to the ministry and the night of my ordination. Both of these events instilled in me a confidence of my call and inspired in me trust in God's provision and presence as I served.

In the second semester of my junior year at Albion College, I went off campus to Philadelphia to participate in a program geared to help students in an internship-like experience learn what it may be like to work in their chosen field of study. I was pre-med. I followed different health professionals, wanting to discern if I really wanted to be a doctor or something in a different health career. I was finding the premed course of study very

stressful. I really didn't know if I would "make the grade."

One afternoon, I was meeting with one of the program coordinators, sharing my struggle. She asked me to share with her about what I valued in my life. I told her my faith played a pivotal role in my life. She asked me, "Have you ever thought about being a pastor?" Being raised in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, which does not ordain women, I said to her, "No." I had never seen a woman preach or lead worship. I was barely aware there were female pastors. In the seconds that she asked me that question, all of a sudden I felt very warm and light, as if a burden had been lifted from my shoulders. The room became muted and soft. As I said, "No, I have never thought about being a pastor," I said yes to becoming a pastor.

It wasn't until two days later that I remembered I belonged to a church that does not ordain women. With some anxiety, I called home to tell my mom what had happened. When I said I wanted to be a pastor, she said to me, "I wondered when you would come to that." I was very blessed to have the support and affirmation of my parents. When I said to my mom, "Our church does not ordain women," she said, "But other ones do."

With this mystical experience of being called and the unquestionable presence of God in that room and the support of my family, I began the path toward ordination.

After I met all the requirements, passed all the exams and earned my M.Div. from Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio, the evening of my ordination in the chapel at Wittenburg University in Springfield, Ohio, arrived. I and the others to be ordained that evening were at the rehearsal for the service. My family had arrived and was having dinner

at a nearby restaurant. I was going to meet them there after the rehearsal. The rehearsal ran long. By the time I arrived at the restaurant, everyone was done eating and it was too late for me to order. I ate from the food that was left on the table. A single roll in the breadbasket and a piece of lemon pepper fish. Bread and fish!

This is my favorite and most memorable meal of all time. Just as we are strengthened and nurtured in the sacrament of Holy Communion to engage in mission and ministry in the name of our Lord, this simple meal of bread and fish was a sign to me of God's provision. It was an assurance that God would feed me, strengthen me and nurture me in whatever way I needed as the future of my call unfolded.

Nearly 35 years later, I can give testimony to the presence and provision of God as I have served in both the capacity of a professional chaplain and a parish pastor. Like Mary, the mother of Jesus, I rejoice in my call to bring forth the presence of Jesus through my presence and with the word and the sacraments. With Mary I say, "Behold, I am a handmaiden of the Lord. Let it be to me according to the words you have spoken."

Glorious God, thank you for the call to ministry. For those discerning a call, may your Spirit lead. For all of us privileged to serve, continue to grant us strength to serve with joy. Amen.

Linda Jaffke Hilliard. Ordained 1986. Currently serving in the Southeastern Synod.



Last Gas for 82 Miles



My little Honda, bulging with my belongings, slowed down while I did a double-take. The tank was filled for the long, unfamiliar drive 30 years ago, but the reality on the sign still pulled me up short. Then I felt another jolt — of anticipation. This isolation was going to open the world.

I was on my way to my next position as an interim in a place I had never been, serving people I had never met before. It would be a story of dinosaur bones, traveling 40 miles to visit parishioners, radio broadcasts, ordination, deep sadness, and love.

I knew the people would teach me what I needed to know about them. I was respected for my sermons. I had experience in counseling and conflict resolution. But I wasn't certain of the procedures for special services. This was going to be a great opportunity — no family responsibility and few distractions in the small Montana town. I'd have time to learn the right way to worship. Not that there's a wrong way, but I wanted to follow the recommendations of the church. Between my Manual on the Liturgy (1979) and the Bible, I would be fine.

My first daunting challenge was Ash Wednesday. I flipped through the manual's pages listed in the index and dug in. "Yet more powerful (than the words 'we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves') is the gathering of Biblical images in the baptismal service. Most of all it is in the services for Ash Wednesday and Holy Week that one encounters, in both words and actions, powerful and evocative imagery: the Ash Wednesday exhortation to spiritual struggle and warfare against everything that leads us away from the love of God and of neighbor, and the signing of penitents with ashes" (18).

"The Lenten season begins on Ash Wednesday and lasts 40 days (excluding Sundays which are always feast days celebrating the resurrection). Lent is to be understood as a time to reflect on baptism and its basis in the death and resurrection of Jesus" (24).

"For Ash Wednesday the preferred color is black, suggesting the ashes to which all things must eventually return. The starkness of black is more appropriate to Ash Wednesday — the most solemn day of the year — than it is to Good Friday, when the mood is one of subdued rejoicing in the victory won on the cross" (25).

"The leaders must learn the grace of a natural and dignified presidential style. They must learn to be comfortable with what they do and still remain respectful of it" (160). "If those who lead the worship of God's people insist on bringing the language and the spirit down to the level of the ordinary, they have made the liturgy a personalized, privatized and exclusive thing; not everyone will be able to participate in it. The people are there not to be entertained but to extend themselves so that the liturgy might extend them and teach them. Formal language enables everyone in the assembly to find an expression of needs, desires and feelings that they can identify with and expand personally" (161).

If the congregation kneels on Ash Wednesday, the ministers kneel at the altar rail or on cushions (226). "Periods of silence are appropriate and are to be preferred on penitential occasions such as Ash Wednesday" (246).

"The spirit of Ash Wednesday is most solemn, close to that of the Jewish Day of Atonement. The suggested color is black, the color of ashes and desolation. The Ash Wednesday liturgy marks the beginning of a penitential discipline which climaxes in the absolution and peace of the Maundy Thursday liturgy. The mood is penitence and reflection on the



quality of our faith and life” (306).

“The preparation of the ashes may be done privately or it might be part of the Shrove Tuesday activity in the congregation. The preparation of the palms might conclude with the pleasant medieval custom of the farewell to the Alleluia.

Ashes suggest judgment and God’s condemnation of sin; frailty, our total dependence upon God for life; humiliation; and repentance. ... Moreover, ashes suggest cleansing and renewal” (307).

No flowers, organ only with congregational singing. Psalm 51. The Gloria Patri. The Exhortation. Silence for meditation and self-examination. Begin with the act of confession and repentance. The imposition of ashes — no personal names. Silence, no background music. Perhaps Psalm 90. Conclusion of confession — no absolution. Holy Communion, and more (307).

Whew!

I followed the suggestions. I knelt in silence at the rail. And they were in spirit with me.

The people spoke of the power of that service for weeks. Now the color is purple, and I lament what has been lost for us all.

My yearning for adventure was satisfied that holy season in a place I had never been, serving people I had never met before whose lives had come to fill my heart. It’s all about love, isn’t it? The love we could feel in that service together, each of us wrapped in our own yearning to know that love of God that is offered so freely yet was so costly for Jesus.

We began in the depths of our need and worthlessness. Only by beginning there could we truly appreciate Good Friday and Easter.

My experience with the Ash Wednesday ritual informed my pastoral leadership from then on. Ritual comforts people, gives them space and allows their needs and wants to come forth. Silence and meditation encourage awareness and growth. When I was up-front, people watched me intently. I tried to remember that the leader becomes a model for them by worshiping, not merely turning pages, by having respect for the space and the people and by an attitude of reverence for the mystery of our faith.

Sometimes I wonder what the church can offer that’s not available anywhere else. Then I recall an extraordinary Ash Wednesday service in a small church 82 miles from the nearest freeway.

Almighty God, we still hear “our Lord’s call to intensify our struggle against sin, death, and the devil — all that keeps us from loving you and each other. This is the struggle to which we were committed at baptism. Your forgiveness and the power of the Spirit to amend our lives continue because of your love for us in Jesus, our Savior,” and along with our thanks we offer endless praise. Amen. —Lutheran Book of Worship: Ministers Desk Edition, 137

I was driving home from Holden Village, thinking about becoming a tour guide, when the word “seminary” popped into my head and a double rainbow appeared on the Columbia River, both of which led to bargaining with God, saying “yes” and being ordained in 1991.

*Kristin D. Anderson
Roseville, Minn.*



A Watershed Moment



I heard God calling me to service very early in my life. Since ordination was not an option for women at that time, I assumed this service would take the form of volunteering for the Peace Corps (which was very public and popular at the time), and when I returned, I would either seek missionary opportunities or become a social worker.

I was always very active and present in the church and would speak very candidly about serving God in my life. In hindsight, I realize that others could also see my dedication, desire and joy about this.

I was in seventh grade in junior high school when my father called me to his side. He read a little news article he had found in the middle of his Daily News newspaper (which he read religiously every morning with his morning coffee).

“I found this for you, and I thought you would be interested,” he said to me. It was a little newsprint article about the ordination of the Rev. Elizabeth Platz into the ministry of Word and Sacrament on Nov. 22, 1970. I read that article over and over again. First, I kept the article in my pocket. Then I kept the article in the top drawer of my bedroom bureau. I looked at it so often that the paper on which it was typed became dog-eared and the print itself began to be smudged.

To read it was a watershed moment. Now it was clear exactly what I was supposed to do to serve God in my life. The Rev. Elizabeth Platz opened the door to ordination for me and so many others.

Not that I, much like Moses and everyone else who has ever been called by God, tried to weasel out of the call. I was an awkward, tongue-tied teenager with very low self-esteem. Nothing made me more comfortable than to blend into the walls of whatever room I was in.

I could not understand why God would call me. Why not my younger brother, who had great charisma and was the life of every party? And besides, he was male. It would be so much easier for him.

But God’s call is like a persistent knocking on a wooden door. And when I finally surrendered my will to that call, not only did the knocking stop but I experienced the peace of God that passes all understanding.

It was not easy. I had no role models to imitate. I was sure that at one or another point along the way, the door would be shut, and I would go no further. Each time I ran into an obstacle or roadblock, there were wonderful people to help me through, or help me walk around, or help me climb over or tunnel under.

I was ordained on Sunday, June 26, 1983, the first woman to be ordained in the East Coast Synod of the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches.

I love the ordained ministry of Word and Sacrament. I love parish ministry, even with its ebbs and flows, its often-tedious work, its two-steps-forward-and-one-step-back nature of serving congregations.

There is nothing I would rather do. This is what I wanted to do. This is all I ever wanted to do, and I am grateful to God that I have been able to do this.

Fast-forward through 36 years of ministry. I finally decided to take my turn at being a voting member for the Churchwide Assembly. Our synod voting members graciously elected me a voting member, and I prepared to go to the Churchwide Assembly that would celebrate 50-40-10 years of ordination.

At the celebratory banquet held during the assembly, I got to see and hear the Rev. Elizabeth Platz in person. She had been my heroine all these years, and I was starstruck. I became that awkward, tongue-tied young teenager again. One of our other synod voting members, Marrett Afsten, gently nudged me forward to where the Rev. Elizabeth Platz was sitting. Finally I was face to face with the woman who had changed my life.

I told her that she was my heroine. I told her the story of the little newspaper article, and I thanked her for opening that door. With Marrett's urging, I asked her if she would take a picture with me, and she graciously agreed.

I have that picture in my cell phone, and I take it with me wherever I go. I am so grateful to God.

The Rev. Harriet JR Wieber, Holy Trinity Lutheran Church of Flatbush, Brooklyn, New York.

"Wow, could I do that, too?"



When I think about my formation as a pastor, there are many experiences that come to mind. Perhaps the most pivotal, however, took place when I was quite young. When I was maybe 5 or 6 years old, my home congregation called its first female pastor — at least, the first in my lifetime. Though

this is now nearly 30 years ago, I remember her smile, her kindness and her joy vividly. She was warm and inviting, perhaps because she had two daughters close to my age, who became my playmates at church events. At some point, our pastor gifted me a pair of hand-me-down ballet slippers, a gift that I absolutely cherished.

I recall sitting in the sanctuary one of the many Sundays I got to hear our pastor preach. As I gazed up at her, standing in the pulpit, robed and vested in full garb, beaming as she proclaimed the good news, I remember thinking to myself, "Wow, could I do that, too?"

This epiphany moment is one that has stuck with me throughout my life and comes to mind often as I lead worship in a community that celebrates children. Looking back, I marvel at the impact this pastor had on my early sense of call to ministry, without even realizing it. Now serving as a pastor, I'm sure she was caring for me just as she cared for the other children in our congregation, simply seeking to share God's love with me, and in the process, she unintentionally became a conduit of the Spirit's stirring with me. I pray that my presence might encourage young girls and boys to see in themselves what God sees in them, what God has created and calls good — the full capacity for love, compassion and leadership that God has created in them — and that they might be empowered to live into God's call, whether that be as a pastor, deacon, church professional or lay leader doing God's work anywhere in the world!

Kim Kylo, Associate Pastor, Zion Lutheran Church, Stewardville, Minnesota.



Vision for Mission and Humanity



I have served Grace Lutheran Church in downtown Phoenix for nearly 10 years. Located across the street from a large city park, the congregation has, for a little over 30 years, reached out to folks who make the park their home. During that time, the relationship of folks experiencing homelessness who actively participate in congregational programs with the rest of the congregation has shifted so that, today, folks experiencing homelessness who choose to make Grace their spiritual home are recognized as full members and participants with gifts to give. While I have long been an advocate for justice, worked in a shelter for a year, and was drawn to Grace partly because of our outreach ministry, just like some others within our community, I needed to be formed in understanding the full humanity of those marginalized by our society because of homelessness. I am not completely sure how the shift happened, but I remember a former staff member saying, “No one wants to be pitied.” And I remember a core member of the congregation, who is currently homeless, saying, “No one likes to be small.” What I heard in these comments was: Everyone has dignity. Everyone has gifts to give.

What I’ve learned from my own shift is that the way we well-intentioned Christians define “mission” often denies the dignity and ignores the giftedness of those on the receiving end of our programs. The people of Grace are incredibly resilient, giving, hopeful and joyous Jesus-followers. The experience of homelessness has taught some of us even greater resilience, generosity, hope and faith. We are a community of Jesus-followers, not doers of mission and receivers of mission.

This learning has profoundly formed me as a pastor and as a person, and I am grateful

for and humbled by the opportunity to serve and lead God’s people. My proudest moment as a pastor was the day I biked up to the church where, as usual, a group of those in our community were waiting in line for dinner, most of the folks experiencing homelessness, and I overheard someone say to their friend: “That’s Pastor Sarah. She’s one of us.”

Prayer by Kate Compston, from the book *Soul Weavings: A Gathering of Women’s Prayers*, edited by Lyn Klug:

O God,
who am I now?
Once, I was secure in familiar territory,
in my sense of belonging,
unquestioning of the norms of my culture,
the assumptions built into my language,
the values shared by my society.
But now you have called me out and away
from home
and I do not know where you are leading.
I am empty, unsure, uncomfortable.
I have only a beckoning star to follow.
Journeying God,
pitch your tent with mine
so that I may not become deterred
by hardship, strangeness, doubt.
Show me the movement I must make
toward a wealth not dependent on
possessions
toward a wisdom not based on books
toward a strength not bolstered by might
toward a God not confined to heaven
but scandalously earthed, poor,
unrecognized ...
Help me find myself
as I walk in others’ shoes. Amen.

Sarah Stadler has served as pastor at Grace Lutheran Church in Phoenix since 2010 and was ordained at the congregation of her first call, St. Peter Lutheran Church in Denver, Iowa, in 2006.

Growing (Up) in Grace



There are three ways I've described myself when asked about my journey into ordained ministry:

1. I'm Lutheran to the DNA level.

My grandfather, the Rev. Charles A. Marks, was a Lutheran pastor in the late 19th to early 20th centuries. He organized and served parishes in North Carolina and Virginia. Although I never knew him, his legacy was an important part of my upbringing.

2. I grew up in the choir loft.

Because of my mother, a dedicated choir member with a lovely mezzo soprano voice, I spent many Wednesday evenings listening to the choir rehearsals while I completed my homework in the robing room. When I dropped out of the children's choir at the age of 8, I joined my mother in the alto section of the adult choir. From her, the organist and the members of the church choir, I gained my love of the Lutheran liturgy and the hymnody of our faith.

3. My relationship with my home congregation is truly lifelong.

Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church, Waynesboro, Virginia, is my church home and place of my faith formation as a child and young adult. I was baptized, confirmed, married and ordained into ministry at Grace, surrounded by the spiritual family who guided my faith journey. When my time on earth is done, I will be inurned in the columbarium there. Regardless of where I've studied, lived or served, I have always come home to Grace.

With the support of my home congregation, I attended church camp, went to Virginia Synod youth events, discovered my gifts of teaching and worship leading, and, when the time came

for me to respond to God's call to ministry, I was given financial support and sent off to seminary with love and prayers. There are many pastors, synod leaders, friends and professors who have played major roles in my journey into ordained ministry, and for them I give utmost thanks. However, it all began with and in Grace.

God of grace and love, your gifts come in many forms. We give thanks, especially, for the gifts of congregations, pastors and other people who have brought us to understand the immeasurable grace you have provided through the life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. May we be instruments of that grace in our lives so that our ministries will bring others to know the joy of being at home in you. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Pastor Janice Marie E. ("JMe") Lowden was ordained on March 6, 1988; has served congregations in Pennsylvania and Maryland; served as ELCA Global Mission regional representative in Tanzania with her husband, Bob; and currently lives in Stephens City, Virginia, where she serves as pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church.

No Coincidences



I was a registered nurse. I had always known that I would be. One Sunday I went to worship at the little ELCA church at the end of my block. Our pastor was gone, and there was a woman preaching. I remember thinking, "Huh. Women can be pastors?" (This was probably about 1987 or so, but I had been gone from church for about ten years during college and the early years of my marriage.) I listened to her intently. I thought about her sermon all week; for months, really. I remembered her face and her name. I became more involved in Bible study and faith formation.



In 1995, our new pastor was gone one Sunday, and a woman pastor was preaching. Her sermon literally blew me away. I thought about it for a very long time. I pestered our church secretary into finding out her address, and I wrote her a letter thanking her for the sermon.

In 2001, I had a distinct call to ministry, something that very much surprised me. It took a few years to figure out how to go to seminary part-time while still working as a nurse with three children. Five years later, during my ministry-in-context year, I sat down at a citywide worship service near my seminary friend, Maggie. She turned to the pastor next to her and said, “Pastor Cheryl, do you know my friend Jan?” She grinned and said, “Know her? She sent me a fan letter!” She was that second pastor!

Finally, it was time to stop working as a nurse to be a full-time pastoral intern. In 2008, my supervisor and I went to the fall theological conference. I was sitting in a large room, at one end of a table. The flow of people going to their chairs stopped, and I glanced up ... to see the name tag of the woman nearest me. “Pastor Sue L.!” I gasped. “I think I am studying to be a pastor ... because of you!” We had lunch together that day as I talked and talked about how I now realized her words had been the seed that was planted in my heart some 20 years prior.

Before that day, I had long thought that becoming an ordained minister came out of the blue in my life. I had faith, but I’d always believed that caring for patients as a nurse would be the way I lived out my faith active in love. I had no idea women were even being

ordained during my last years of high school. I always said that this call was God’s idea and came from God. On reflection, it’s been humbling and encouraging and exciting to realize that God was preparing me for ministry through these two encounters. Even though I heard many good sermons in those 20 years, the Spirit chose to call me through the sermons of these two women.

No coincidences! Thank you, Pastor Sue and Pastor Cheryl!

May you hear God’s voice in the words of those that God puts in your path in the whole of your lives.

Now retired from active ministry and nursing, Jan LaVake was ordained in 2010 and served two congregations.

“That’s Funny – A Girl Pastor.”



The small, newly printed photos were lying on the coffee table at my mother’s house. I was all of 29 years old in the pictures, wearing a clergy collar and looking away from the camera into an unknown and distant future. This handful of photos was ready to go with my application materials to the Minnesota Synod of the Lutheran Church in America as I sought to be introduced to a parish that would accept me as its new pastor.

Friends had stopped by to visit while I was home for a few weeks at Christmastime during my last year of seminary, 1977-78. Their petite, 5-year-old girl picked up one of the photos and looked it over closely. Then she looked at me and said, “Is this you?” I nodded. “You look like a pastor.” “Yes, Celeste,” I answered,

“I am a pastor.” “That’s funny,” she said, shrugging, “a girl pastor.”

Others in those early years weren’t nearly so polite, or cute, for that matter. There was the man in the elevator in the large metropolitan hospital in Washington, D.C., where I lived and was then doing a unit of clinical pastoral education. I was wearing the same black clergy collar, at that point, brand new. “So you’re a priest, huh? What do I call you, ‘Father’? Or ‘Mother’? Ha, ha.” I quietly answered, “Most people just call me ‘Pastor.’”

For the record, I was encouraged to purchase and wear that clergy collar by my supervising pastor. It would make it easier, he said, when I visited parishioners in the hospital. Or so he thought. First of all, it was not easy to find one that fit me at the Catholic supply store, the only shopping option available. The male clerk was visibly flummoxed as I asked him to help me figure out the collar size I needed in the men’s black clergy shirt. I remember trying it on at home in front of a full-length mirror, stunned at the pastoral look around my neck and at the tails of the shirt nearly reaching my knees.

The shirt didn’t help me much at my first visit to that same large hospital. The pastor had directed me to stop at the information desk to ask where to get my parking ticket stamped. Clergy were allowed to park for free, and I definitely needed that perk. When I asked where to go to get my free parking-ticket stamp, the woman at the desk told me that only ministers had that privilege. I fumbled my words with a lengthy explanation about how I was visiting a parishioner for a church at the direction of the pastor. She

repeated that free parking was available only to ministers. I paused, breathed in deeply, drew myself up to my full 5’2” height and said firmly, “I am a minister.” “Oh,” she said, “just go down the hall, turn right, and then it’s the first door on your left.”

I had not really dwelt on the facet of being a woman as I struggled to determine how to go forward with my life and education. I knew I wanted to go deeper in religious studies and training for a vocation in the church after working as a lay professional. I had served as a Christian education director two years in each of two different parishes after graduating from college. I was married to someone who had studied to be a pastor and now wanted to go on to graduate school. Together we were accepted at Catholic University of America in D.C. in different graduate programs. I was seeking a master’s in religion, not quite sure of my future.


During my year at Catholic University, 1974-75, I ended up studying biblical Greek with a Jesuit scholar in the spring and in the summer taking that unit of CPE in a parish-based setting. By September I had driven the 80 miles north to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, and was accepted into the seminary there. I began the vocational process for ordination with the Maryland Synod of the LCA. The clinical training in the summer had forced me to face both my shortcomings and my positive attributes and skills, often two sides of the same coin. I knew I was not worthy for this call, but I had also realized that the only people God had available to serve as pastors were ordinary human beings, sinners in need of grace.

Yes, I was a woman, but more importantly I acknowledged that I was a forgiven child of God who had received gifts that led to a call to the multifaceted vocation of parish pastor.

In the congregation where I worked that summer, near downtown Washington, D.C., I experienced the support and encouragement of many parishioners. They affirmed me as their pastor during those three short months. Nothing was said about the fact that I was female. They were helping me discover and affirm my call and vocation.

This affirmation from those faithful people was essential to me. So was the support of the congregation near Washington where I served first as a parish assistant and then as an intern pastor. My self-doubt trailed me through those early years. The first two parishes I served in northeastern Minnesota bravely stepped out to receive and support me from 1978-84. They were just as much of a blessing to me as I was to them.

It was only later in life that I realized that I had not met a woman pastor until long after I was ordained. I didn't hear a woman preach (other than myself) until a few years after my ordination. I didn't experience a woman preaching and leading in her own parish until just a decade ago. My role models for becoming a woman pastor were almost nonexistent. No wonder I struggled to believe God would call me to this noble and important vocation. Now, 42 years later, I am so grateful for my journey. A girl pastor — that's funny ... and a blessing beyond belief.



Loving and gracious God, thank you for continuing to lead your church into new frontiers and an ever-expanding vision of your kingdom. Bless all those who serve and minister in your name and for your sake with courage, wisdom and strength. Continue to call out those who have not yet acknowledged their gifts for ministry,

and open the eyes and arms of your followers to welcome and receive them. In your holy name we pray. Amen.

Karen L. Soli, ordained in 1978, received her M.Div. from Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg and her D.Min. in preaching from the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, and has led parishes large and small in northwestern and central Minnesota and in Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

“Follow your joy and look for the extraordinary.”



I never thought I would ever be a pastor. I did not feel “called” in the same way my friends, husband or other ministry colleagues described their own experience of call. Yet, I’m now about to enter my 15th year of ordination to Word and Sacrament ministry. My calling was, and continues to be, nothing resembling “normal.”

Feeling a passion for studying and discussing theology, I entered the seminary at the age of 23 with absolutely no intention of being ordained to any form of rostered leadership in the church. I wanted to talk about God, to wonder and suppose, to let my imagination run wild about how things came into being and how they continue to unfold in such a wild array of creativity and freedom. I was not working to pin down a systematic understanding of doctrine or rubrics but rather wanted to celebrate the limitless possibilities of a God who creates from nothing and manages to always be connecting what was, what is and what is to come. For me it is never about building a rational argument to convince my peers and parishioners that God exists and is watching us to make sure creation works out the way it was planned from the beginning, but rather sharing the excitement



of wonder and surprise in following the always-unexpected activity of the Spirit seeking form. I never thought there was a place in parish ministry for this type of theology. “Normal” parish ministry seemed to have a purpose and a plan, and that was never something in which I felt compelled to participate.

But I loved learning about theology and being in discussion with all those who too loved listening to the stories of the church and the experiences of those folks throughout history who had asked the same questions about God that I was asking. And somewhere within my participation on the fringes of the church, I shared my wonder and questions with others, until finally a group I was leading in a Bible study suggested that I should do some preaching because I seemed very happy sharing the stories of God, and that these stories were so compelling just in the sharing of them, nothing more. It was true. I am happy sharing God’s story, and this story is compelling on its own; there is no need to convince or convert. Sharing my wonder and my joy is my calling.

After 20 years of experience teaching within the church, I learned that evangelism was about simply telling the story of God. Evangelism is not converting anyone nor convincing people they should believe in God but rather sharing the joy I experience while participating in the activity of God in the world. A new world opened for me in parish ministry, and “normal” would never be a word used to describe it.

I returned to seminary through TEEM in 2016, was ordained a year later and currently serve as a dual-rostered pastor in the ELCA and the United Church of Christ. I participate in a collaborative leadership team of ministers

helping a community of folks wonder and discern what it means to be the Christian partner congregation in an amazing and intentional co-location of a synagogue, a mosque, a church and an interfaith center, called the Tri-Faith Initiative, in Omaha, Nebraska. (www.trifaith.org.) We are a unique ministry in the heart of the country, working to open ever-broadening conversations of wonder about a God who is not bound by a particular faith tradition but rather is revealed and experienced by many in various ways throughout history and faith traditions.

My advice to anyone considering parish ministry? Give up your notions of “normal” and stop trying to decide if you fit a certain expectation of what it means to be a pastor. Instead, follow your joy and look for the extraordinary, because that is where God is calling you to be.

Creator God, as we follow your Spirit into the world, let us share in the wonder and the mystery of the Word made flesh, through which you have opened the eyes of faith to a new and radiant vision of your glory. Beholding the God made visible, we may be drawn to love the God whom we cannot see. Allow this vision to fill our joy and send us into the world to participate with you in the many and various ways you move and eternally create. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Chris Alexander was ordained in the ELCA in 2017 and now serves as the minister of engagement and formation at Countryside Community Church in Omaha, Nebraska, the Christian partner of the Tri-Faith Initiative.



Girl Acolyte to Girl Pastor



I'm a cradle Lutheran, and in 1970, at the age of 10, I rejoiced when my Lutheran Church in America pastor announced one Sunday that women could now be ordained in the Lutheran church. That joyful response was short-lived: my family moved to Beaumont, Texas, in 1972, and we joined the local American Lutheran Church congregation. When the council president asked my little brother to serve as an acolyte, I excitedly volunteered too, but the elderly man scowled at me, shook his head and turned away without a word. I felt hurt and excluded. When I asked my pastor why I couldn't be an acolyte, he replied, "Because the church says that girls can't be acolytes." It was a dismissal that offered me no explanation, no apology and certainly no word of God's grace.

I complained to my mother, "Why would God make me a girl and fill me with love for the church but then not let me serve?" Her own early childhood experience as a Roman Catholic informed her reply: "Girls can serve God in other ways. You can help me wash the Communion cups." Great: boys can serve in worship; girls can wash the dishes! I wanted to be proud of my little brother on his first Sunday as an acolyte, but stinging tears filled my eyes as I watched him. I struggled through that service, heavy with silent resentment and envy, then guilt and shame. Why wasn't I worthy enough to serve the God who was supposed to love me unconditionally?

Several months later, my pastor informed me that the council had voted to permit girls to serve as acolytes, and you'd better believe that I was the first girl to sign up! As I lit the altar candles, my eyes again filled with tears, but this time I was overwhelmed by an intense joy. I felt affirmed and validated as someone,

created and loved by God, who was no longer rejected by God or God's church. My gifts were now welcomed and appreciated: the door that had been closed to me because of my gender had been thrown open, and according to my wise mom, it was absolutely the working of the Holy Spirit.

I know that my experience as an adolescent "girl acolyte" led me to serve Christ's church as a faithful layperson; decades later, I responded to a call by the Spirit of God that led me to pursue vocational ministry and ordination. I entered candidacy and divinity school at the age of 50 and was ordained on July 10, 2016, called to pastor an ELCA congregation in Memphis, Tennessee.

I now serve an ELCA congregation in Blacksburg, Virginia, and my "girl acolyte" experience from long ago continues to inform my ministry as I proclaim God's unfailing love and mercy to a wounded world. I know how deeply it hurts to be rejected by the church and its members, especially when we, "the church," behave as if we own Christ's church or use our privilege and entitlement to restrict who may have access to God's free gift of grace. Thanks be to God that the ELCA, through the working of the Holy Spirit, has thrown down the barriers of gender, race and sexual identity that once barred the way to temple service and ordination in God's holy house. We have other barriers to tear down, but by the love of Jesus Christ, the grace of God and the inspiration of the Spirit, those barriers will one day be dismantled so that all people of the world may have access to God's unconditional love and forgiveness without exception, as we truly learn to love our neighbors as ourselves.



Radiant God, we give thanks for the opportunity to serve you and Christ's holy church as pastors, deacons, vicars, acolytes, lectors, lay leaders and baptized members of the universal body of Christ. Fill us with your Holy Spirit, that we may be advocates for the outcast, the downtrodden and the lost, enfolding them in the embrace of Christ Jesus that never rejects but always includes, regardless of circumstance or history. Shower us with your never-ending mercy, that we may be merciful to all your people, shining your eternal light into the darkest corners of this world. Bless us, O Lord, in the name of your Son, our Risen Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

The Rev. Monica L. Weber was baptized as an infant into the Lutheran church in Tucson, Arizona; after a career in marketing, she answered God's call to vocational ministry, earning an M.Div. at Vanderbilt Divinity School and completing Lutheran studies at Trinity Lutheran Seminary at Capital University in Bexley, Ohio; she was ordained at St. Timothy Lutheran Church in Hendersonville, Tennessee, on July 10, 2016.

No Small Lives, Only Small Congregations



I grew up in a very small town in the middle of nowhere, but the first two pastors I had were both women. I consider myself pretty lucky that from an early age I got to see women in leadership and that it was never a question of whether or not women could be pastors. It's only as I've gotten older that I've realized the reason my first two pastors were women was almost certainly because we were a tiny church in the middle of nowhere. Any pastor with other options would have gone elsewhere. We had women pastors because we couldn't "afford" a man.

I won't pretend to be proud of that, and as a child I had no idea of the politics around anything. I think it's safe to say that my home congregation was not a progressive bunch, looking to pave the way for future generations. They just took what they could get.

But the delightfully subversive work of God means that even our sin and shortsightedness can be transformed to work for God's good work in the world. I am a pastor today for many reasons, but one of those reasons is because I never thought it wasn't an option. Those women who said "yes" to that call may never know what their presence meant in that small community. But to me, their courage and willingness to bear that burden opened doors for all of us who came after.

So to all those women who said "yes" to thankless calls and sometimes toxic congregations, I want to say, "Thank you." Your work was not in vain. Your life has borne fruit far greater than one lifetime can hold. I would not be the pastor I am, nor would we be the church we are, without your faithfulness.

A blessing for all who wonder whether the struggle was worth it: May you be blessed with eyes that see the span of generations. May you be blessed with ears that hear the good news through the lips of those who have followed in your footsteps. May you be blessed with hands that receive the goodness of God, pouring down on us like the rain (Isaiah 55:10-11).

Pastor Rachel Knoke serves with the people of Trinity Lutheran in Green Bay, Wisconsin, and was ordained in 2015.

God Broke Open My Heart



I was hired as a staff person in a Lutheran church in my early 30s. Soon after, the congregation transitioned to a new pastor, and the interim pastor encouraged me to go to seminary. The logistics of that were complicated where I lived, especially with young children at home. But mostly, I didn't think I would ever want to inhabit that role. I was nervous in situations of crisis and never knew what to say to people who were grieving or scared.

Eventually, I began to share the responsibility with the pastor of leading the chapel time for the weekday preschool in our church. It was my turn the week of Sept. 11, 2001. The pastor was out of town, so I was left to wonder how much I should address the national tragedy of the terror attacks with three- and four-year-old children.

I decided to stick to the original theme for that week, which I can't remember now. We lit the candles on the altar to remind us that Jesus is the light of the world. We sang, "Lord, Listen to Your Children Praying." I told a Bible story, and we closed with our "goodbye" song.

And no one moved. The teachers didn't move. The children didn't move. We were suspended in that time and place for a moment that seemed like several moments.

Then one child spoke up. "Miss Lynne, on TV airplanes keep crashing and my mommy is crying all the time." All the children looked at me, the teachers looked at me, as if they all needed to hear a word of reassurance. Where was God in all of this?

I don't remember what I said, and I am sure that the Spirit spoke through me that day. God was present in this holy moment of our

questions and fears, and I was humbled to be God's instrument of peace. That day God broke open my heart to a deeper ministry than I had ever imagined I was capable of engaging in.

It took several more years to find my way to seminary. I am grateful for that encouraging congregation in which I grew to see myself as a different kind of leader in the church.

Holy God, you give us your Spirit of compassion and love. Help us trust you as we face the trials of life with those you give to us to serve. With your power and presence, we can become more than we ever imagined, through your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Lynne Ogren was ordained in 2015 and is serving as pastor at Zion Lutheran Church in Lewistown, Montana.

Curiosity



It was sometime in the 1940s, during summer vacation Bible school. I sneaked into the quiet, cool sanctuary and breathed in the air of that sacred space.

I was in forbidden territory. That special raised place, where the Communion table, lectern and pulpit resided, was off-limits to most people, especially little girls. In that moment, my curiosity got the best of me, and I very quietly dared to sneak up the three steps. I walked around, looked at the empty table and then moved toward the pulpit. My heart raced, and I was curious to see what church looked

like from there. I stepped up, got up on my tiptoes, peeked over and instantly knew that I was looking at the world from a very special place. I don't remember how long I stood there, but the feeling has never left me.

I always wanted to preach from that place but never did.

Gracious God, stir up the hearts of young girls and boys, fill them with curiosity, draw them to you, call them to your service and empower them to seek their unique ministry. Amen.

Baptized in 1939, Mary Caroline Knight Tokheim was an English teacher in the 1960s, a stay-at-home mom in the 1970s and a seminary student for most of the 1980s. She was ordained in 1990 at the age of 52.

Blessed Are Those



In the resurrection account from John's Gospel, Jesus tells Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." While Jesus spoke of his own resurrection, the statement could hold for women in ministry, too. I give thanks for those women who came before me, who did not see someone like them in leadership yet still believed God called them to do this holy work.

Admittedly, I'd never in my lifetime considered that women couldn't be pastors. Because I was just 8 years old when the ELCA formed, I never really knew a time when my faith tradition didn't ordain women. It is, however, very different to know that women could be

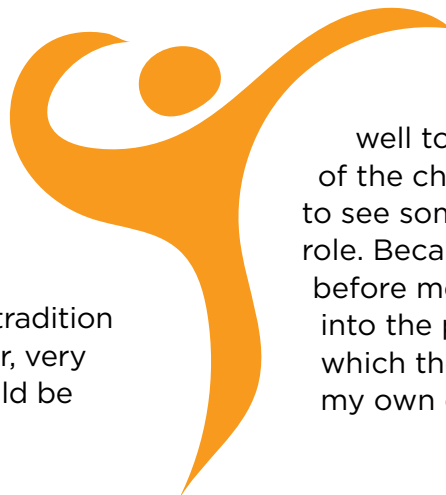
ordained and to see an ordained woman serving in a church. If I had never seen it, did I really believe it was possible?

That changed during my junior year in high school. That year, my home congregation welcomed a seminary intern — and she was a woman, the first one I'd seen in our church's pulpit. She was young, loved to sing, had a great sense of humor and seemed a lot like me. While it certainly helped that she and I had a lot in common, the most revelatory thing about her presence in my church was that she was a woman.

Before that time, I could not say that I'd felt a call to ordained ministry. It's not that the church wasn't part of my life. My faith shaped me in powerful ways. For that matter, some of the biggest parts of my faith development came from women like my congregational matriarch confirmation mentor or my always-praying grandma. But my faith, my identity and the kinds of people God used to lead the church simply didn't connect.

And then I heard a woman preach, heard her called "pastor," heard her pray and teach and sing the liturgy. And for the first time, I heard the earliest whispers of the church's call to ministry in my own life. Because of her witness, I could see and believe that God could call someone like me.

It's one thing to know, theoretically, that someone exactly like you could be called into ministry and used well to the glory of God and the good of the church. It's an entirely other thing to see someone just like you serving in that role. Because of the women who served before me, who had the boldness to step into the pulpit, who claimed the work to which the Spirit called them, I could open my own eyes to the work God had for me.



Blessed are these women. Because of them I could see, believe and do, for the good of the church and God's kingdom.

Beloved of God, see how your Creator loves you. See how your Savior calls you. See how your Sanctifier blesses you. Claim your work in God's good world so that all may see and know the God in whose name you serve. Amen.

Megan Torgerson was ordained in 2008 in the same church building where she was baptized, took first communion and was married. She currently serves as lead pastor at Easter Lutheran Church in Eagan, Minnesota.

From Lawyer to Pastor



Growing up in a Lutheran congregation, I had a greatly beloved pastor. I remember the day he handed me my third grade Bible (or maybe I just remember the picture I have seen so many times!). What I subconsciously learned at church is that to be a pastor, you have to be an old guy with white hair. I am none of these!

When I was in eighth grade, my congregation called its first female pastor. Fast-forward a few years. As a young adult I was a member of a large, vibrant congregation that had not one, not two, but three women pastors! The Holy Spirit was at work subtly showing me that, yes, I could be a pastor.

I never had any inkling that I was being called into ministry. My dad is a lawyer, and I didn't really know what I was going to do, so I went to law school and then worked as a lawyer for 17 years. I didn't leave law so much as I was

called to something else that God had in mind. I remember the first time someone said, "Are you going to seminary to be a pastor?" and my response was "No, why would I do that?"

None of it made logical sense. Why would I go back to school for four years, cut my salary in half and be subject to being sent anywhere, much like the Harry Potter sorting hat?

But God had other ideas. In my new member class in this congregation there were eight of us who were young women, and we formed a small group. Two of our friends developed life-threatening illnesses. We had a fundraiser for them, hoping to raise \$3,000, and we raised \$25,000. I had spoken at the fundraiser, talking about how we came together as a group of friends. Not long after that, one of the pastors asked if I would share this story in worship. We were doing a sermon series where the pastor would start the sermon, someone would share a faith story and the pastor would conclude the sermon. I thought, "I can do that. I've already told this story." I wrote it and sent it to my pastor. She said, "This is very good, but how has it affected you and your faith?"

That was the hardest question I have ever been asked! I didn't know the answer to that question, so how was I supposed to stand in front of the congregation at five worship services and share this?

I thought about it, prayed about it and talked to friends. I came up with something to say. I thought, "Good, now I've answered that question." But it kept nagging at me. I discovered that a faith story is not static but



ongoing. Our pastor had preached that day on “going on a journey you did not expect to take.” I thought that that applied to my friends who were sick, but I didn’t know it applied to me!

Having lunch with a mentor pastor, I shared this story, and after pausing, he said, “It sounds like the Holy Spirit has a lot going on in your life. You need to listen.”

I have never heard more dangerous words! I am now eight years into my ministry and have a better understanding of what the Holy Spirit is calling me to!

Dear God, thank you for these holy callings. Amen.

Pastor Betsy Hoium was ordained in 2012 at Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Minneapolis and serves as pastor of faith formation at Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Roseville, Minnesota.

For All the Saints



I was ordained on a cold and drizzly day, Nov. 2, 1992, the day on which the church commemorates the faithful departed. It wasn’t a date that I would’ve chosen, but it was more about getting it scheduled. For someone who had already experienced many deaths in my life, it just added to an underlying sadness that was a part of my life. Yet, it was also a day of celebration after the long process of seminary, candidacy and then waiting six months after graduation to finally be in a call.

Over the years, this date began to take on more significance as I grew in my own faith and understanding of the call that was entrusted to me. Relationships have always been central to my call, and in each of my

parish settings, it was the people within them that framed my ministry. It has been a humbling privilege to be part of people’s faith journeys as they celebrate their joys, grieve their losses and struggle with questions. To be able to help someone see and experience the love and grace of Christ, which not only is offered to them but they are blessed to share with others, is a grace-filled witness and blessing to my own faith journey.

Each of the relationships in my midst that were entrusted by God saw their shares of high, low and ordinary days. I have always said that one of the reasons that I love ministry (most days) is that no two days are exactly the same. There are not many dull moments, though there are difficult ones. Even those difficult relationships have provided my faith with new insights and understanding (in retrospect, more often than not). As evidenced throughout Scripture, God uses unlikely people and situations to reveal God’s loving and grace-filled presence.

I had a particularly difficult year in my first call when we had an overwhelming number of deaths in the congregation. The congregation and I were not only emotionally exhausted from grief but spiritually drained as well. In those early days of the internet, I sent a request out to family, friends and colleagues asking for their prayers for myself and the congregation. Seeking others to help carry this burden revealed to me and the congregation God’s healing and comfort. Through those prayers, we felt lifted up, given strength and a sense of what it meant to be part of that larger body of Christ, even in semi-rural western New York.

Through this experience and countless others, I have come to see my ordination date as about much



more than an event in my own life. All Souls Day or, in the Latinx tradition, Dia de Los Muertos, honors and celebrates those loved ones who have died, in much the same way as All Saints Day. While some traditions focus on connections to an understanding of purgatory on this date, I have come to view it as a way to think about the connection of our faith with all those who have gone before us, to reflect on the ways in which we travel that road of faith with people of all times and in all places. We remember and celebrate not just their lives but their faithful witness to Christ's resurrecting love and peace for all.

And so, as we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the ordination of women in the ELCA, I am thankful for the faith of all the souls whom I have been blessed to walk alongside, as well as all those who paved the way and those that continue to renew the road behind me.

Benediction (this version of this blessing is adapted from one that my late stepfather, Pastor Lee Dyer, used during his years of ministry):

**May the good Lord bless you and keep you
May the Lord's face shine upon you and be good to you
May the Lord fill you with peace, love and much laughter
And may she set you free to celebrate the life that God has given you in all its fullness!
In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.**

Jennifer (Dyer) Boyd, ordained in 1992, currently serves Trinity Lutheran Church, Brewster, New York, and formerly served St. John's Lutheran Church of Elma, Elma, New York, and Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church, Cobleskill, New York. She is the "senior pastor" to her mother, the Rev. Elaine Berg, who was ordained three years after she was.

God Makes Everything Fit



My formation as a pastor happened, unbeknownst to me, not through one experience but through countless experiences through which God shaped me for ministry.

Growing up in a devout Catholic family gave me a deep appreciation for liturgy, mystery and ritual. A conversion experience through the Cursillo movement opened my heart to receiving God's amazing grace and to a living relationship with Jesus Christ. Years of follow-up in small-group study and sharing showed me the power of the Holy Spirit to nurture faith in community. A journey through youth work, relationships and worship with Christian evangelicals before finding a home in the Lutheran church gave me an ecumenical spirit. Years of work in communications, many of them in the agricultural sector, equipped me with skills for building community in rural parishes. Marriage to an alcoholic, years in Al-Anon, counseling and, ultimately, divorce gave me compassion and understanding for those in similar trials. The illness and death of both my parents while on hospice care gave me a heart for accompanying others on that same journey.

I often thought maybe God would lead me to a career in communications within the church. I even applied for a job in my synod but did not even get an interview. It never occurred to me to become a pastor until, during a presentation at my church by a panel of pastors, something like a haze came over me and I heard an inner voice say, "Be a pastor." It was totally unexpected and filled my heart with surprisingly joyful anticipation. Yes! I could see myself doing that!

It was eight more years before I started seminary — all in God's time. I graduated from Luther the same year one daughter graduated

from high school and the other from college, making it easy to check the “willing to go anywhere” box on the form. It was the right time for transition.

What I learned about formation for ministry in my years as a pastor is to continually remember to trust that God gave me particular gifts and called me to particular places where those gifts could be put to use through the power of the Holy Spirit at work in me and in my congregation and community. It is so tempting to look at the success and skills of other pastors and bemoan my shortcomings. Then the Spirit says, “Be who you are and trust me.”

God has shown me that, when I follow the call of the Holy Spirit, everything seems to fit! It just feels right — even though fear and confusion may have preceded a step easily taken. After retirement, I thought of so many ways I could continue to use my gifts in some sort of ministry that still allowed plenty of time for being a wife, mom and grandma. What to do? I was getting anxious about it. A spiritual director friend said, “Well, how did you know before?” “I just knew,” I answered. “God showed me.” “So won’t God do that again?” Hmmm — back to trusting.

Holy Lord, you provide all I need. Again and again, you have proved your faithfulness. Forgive my lack of trust in your presence and your promises. Thank you for all the ways you have formed me. Thank you for calling me to serve in your kingdom. Open my ears and eyes and heart to the ways you continue to call. Keep me faithful. Amen.

Born and raised in Fargo, North Dakota, Pastor Gayle Pope had a 22-year career in journalism, public relations and marketing communications; graduated from Luther Seminary and was ordained June 29, 2003; then served parishes in western Illinois for 16 years before retiring in 2019.

Ministering to My Mentor



It was the summer of 1983. I was fulfilling my clinical pastoral education (CPE) requirement at a hospital in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., not far from my childhood home. Nor was it far from my home congregation.

On this particular day, I had been assigned to visit patients preparing to undergo surgery the following morning. Upon knocking on the door and entering the room of one of my last patients, I was shocked to be greeted with the face and smile of a former pastor of my home congregation. He was the pastor who had chosen me and taught me, a teenage girl, to serve as an acolyte with both reverence and precision. Did he ever notice how nervous I was, especially during Holy Week? He was the pastor who confirmed me. He was the pastor who encouraged me when I was discerning God’s call and will for my life following my college graduation. He had completed his ministry in my home congregation and accepted another call while I was in high school. I hadn’t seen him in years.

As I walked deeper into his room, my mind was searching to remember the particulars surrounding his health all those years ago. I recalled that he had been quietly battling cancer for a number of years. As he invited me to sit down in the chair next to his bed, he shared that he would be undergoing yet another surgery. I tried to put my CPE training into practice, but how different this visit was from any other that I had made that afternoon. How unexpected but holy and special was the time and conversation and prayer that we shared. This time, I was leading him in prayer — my mentor, my brother-in-Christ, my friend. How blessed I was to have been given this time with him. It was a “God-incidence.”

It would be the last time we'd see each other in this world. He would die and enter the Church Triumphant while I was on internship a few years later.

Three years after that beautiful hospital reunion, I would be the first daughter of the congregation to be ordained.

“Rest eternal grant him, O God. Let light perpetual shine upon him.”

Let us pray ...

**God of grace and surprises,
We give you thanks for the faithful servants
that you have placed in our lives, who have
blessed our journey with their presence,
encouragement, teaching and wisdom. Thank
you for those “God-incidences” that bless our
days, shape our lives and cause us to smile
and cry when we recall them many years
later. Amen.**

*The Rev. Linda C. Hanus, ordained in 1986 in the
Maryland Synod of the Lutheran Church in America.
She is currently serving as co-pastor of Mount
Cross Lutheran in Payson, Arizona, with her clergy
spouse of 36 years, Cliff.*

Journeying with Others in the Chaos of Life



When I was in the fourth grade I decided that I wanted to be a doctor. I studied hard, went to church, played sports and ended up attending the University of Washington. The school was a couple of blocks away from my home congregation, where I was baptized and went to Sunday school, as many children did in the 1950s and '60s. It was a place of familiar comfort. The church library was a great place to study. Occasionally I would read

books from the library. Sometimes the pastor would stop by to see how things were going. Life was going as planned.

During my sophomore year at the UW, much was going on in the world: the Vietnam War bombings, Watergate, protests at Wounded Knee and continuing fights for equality for African Americans, women and the LGBT community, and the oil crisis and environmental concerns. Life did not seem so simple anymore.

I read more books in the church library and began to realize I didn't have all the answers. I had some questions for my pastor. And I wondered if I needed to do some religious studies, too. After much listening, my pastor, who had been on a national group looking into the ordination of women, told me that women could be pastors and that I could combine my interests in medicine and faith in a call to be a hospital chaplain. My initial response was laughter. I couldn't imagine myself as a pastor. But the idea had been planted, and after talking to many others, learning, listening and praying, I began, somewhat tentatively, the journey of becoming a pastor and my ministry, primarily as a hospital/hospice chaplain.

I was ordained in 1980 and retired in 2017. I spent five years in the parish but was primarily a chaplain. My last 17 years, I was gratefully blessed to be able to work with children and their families and helped develop programs in palliative care along with working in pediatric hospice and in grief and loss. And I suppose my early hopes of finding answers through studying for the ministry have (usually) been replaced with the hope to journey with others in the chaos of life and know God is with us all.

Gracious God, remind me to take time and listen, especially to the young people. May I be slow to offer advice and always try to understand. Thanks for those who have been

a listening ear to me. Mindful of your love and caring for all, I walk knowing that you are always present. Amen.

Mardi L. Krusemark was ordained in 1980 and retired in 2017, after spending most of her ministry in chaplaincy, including in hospital care, hospice/palliative care and pediatrics.

Words of Wisdom for a Woman or Girl Considering Becoming a Pastor



The first word is: don't. If you can possibly consider another career path, then do that. If you cannot NOT go to seminary then you must know, in your bones, who you belong to so that, when others tell you, infer, or try to define you that you don't belong or that you are not good enough, then you will recognize the lie. The truth is: you have been baptized into Christ Jesus, you are God's child, you belong and you are, in fact, good enough. Anyone who says otherwise is not speaking of or for God.

If you are young you will think that 50 years is a long time; it turns out that it is not. You too will be a pioneer. Take time to learn about and learn from the women and men who worked long and hard to make the ordination of women happen. It's a good idea to regularly be with other clergywomen for mutual support and a good laugh.

You are under no obligation to answer anyone who questions your call nor listen to "Bible bullets" trying to undermine your call. Refer these people to your synod bishop or the president of your seminary. Other people's opinion about your call is not any of your business. Say so as many times as needed.

If you can avoid being an associate or youth pastor (even if you like kids and work well with others), do it.

If you are going to be effective over the long haul, learn about boundaries and utilize them. Love your congregants, don't need them, and above all don't need to please people. Be faithful to your time off (two days off a week is best). Take all of your vacation and continuing education time. If you are married or get married put your marriage vows ahead of your ordination vows; at the end of the day you come home to your spouse and family, not to your congregation. No good and certainly no love comes from being physically or spiritually exhausted; it's especially bad if this condition becomes chronic.

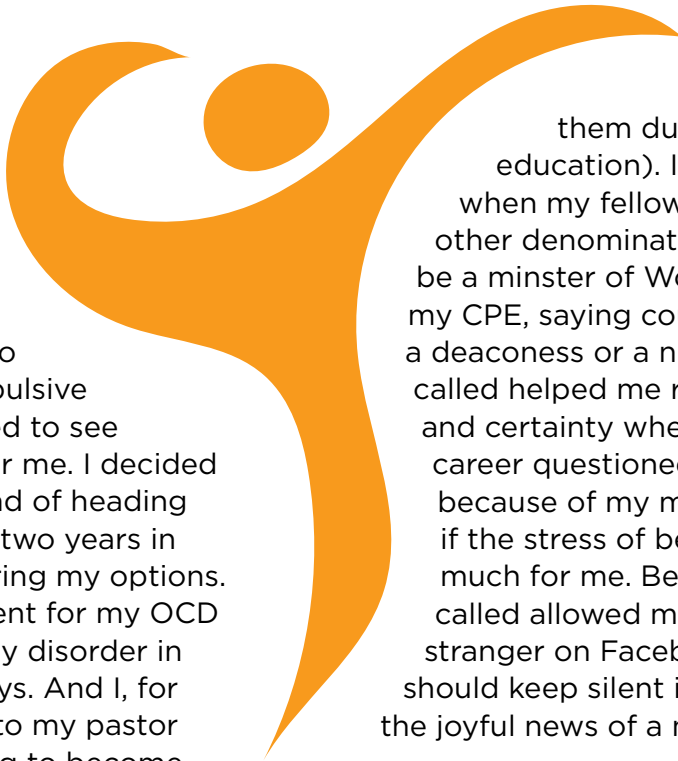
God bless and keep you, fill your heart with compassion and hope, be your strength, give you wisdom, grow your trust in God's presence with you always and remind you that there is no place where God is not. Amen.

Pastor Kathy Burkheimer (retired) graduated from Wartburg Seminary in 1987 and was the first female pastor at each of her three calls. Her husband, Gary Puckett, and two children (Maggie and Nathan) made this journey with her.

It's a Calling, Not a Choice



I was at the 2000 National Youth Assembly in St. Louis, Missouri, when I realized I had no idea what I wanted to be when I grew up. I had just graduated high school, had just been diagnosed with obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and was getting treatment for the first time, and all the plans I thought I had for my future just didn't seem to fit. Honestly, most days, dealing



with my disorder was about the only thing I felt capable of doing, and while naming my disorder helped a lot (it's much easier to say I have OCD than it is to say I have no idea why I do the anxiety-induced compulsive things I do), I still struggled to see much of a future ahead for me. I decided to take a step back. Instead of heading off to a university, I spent two years in community college exploring my options. I continued to get treatment for my OCD and learned to live with my disorder in much more successful ways. And I, for the first time ever, talked to my pastor about this tug I was feeling to become a minister. I had seen women preach at my church when I was in middle school and had served on the internship committee as a youth for a young female pastor when I was in high school. The seeds of ministry had been planted a long time ago, but I was sure God didn't want someone as messy and imperfect as I was. But eventually I asked the question, and my pastor told me the most helpful thing I have ever heard in regards to discerning a calling. He said that if I could be ANYTHING else at all in this world and be happy, I should be it. If I couldn't be anything else, then I was being called to be a pastor, and God would help me to become one.

I soon discovered through prayer and a lot of trial and error that ministry was the path I was being called to walk, and it felt more and more right with each step I took. I carried those words with me on the journey, reminding myself that if God was calling me to this, God would help along the way.

I remember that I was called in the face of many challenges along the way. It was what gave me the courage to walk into a stranger's

room and pray with them during CPE (clinical pastoral education). It was what grounded me when my fellow CPE classmates from other denominations challenged my call to be a minister of Word and Sacrament during my CPE, saying couldn't I be happy being a deaconess or a nun? Knowing I had been called helped me respond with strength and certainty when people throughout my career questioned my ability to be a pastor because of my mental disorder, asking if the stress of being a pastor was too much for me. Believing that I had been called allowed me to ignore the taunts of a stranger on Facebook who told me women should keep silent in the church after I shared the joyful news of a new call.

I continue to turn back to that sense of being called to this day as I wonder if I am strong enough, smart enough and just plain enough to lead a congregation through times as troubled as ours have been recently. I am reassured that I am, not because I am anyone particularly special but because I am called to this ministry and God is helping me along the way.

If I could be anything else in this world, I would be ... but I was called to be a pastor, to share the good news of God's love with everyone I can. To preside at Holy Communion and baptize in the name of God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. To lead, teach, pray for and nurture people in faith to the best of my ability. I did not choose to be a pastor; I answered a call that I could not deny and have felt God walk with me through every challenge and trial that I have come across along the way. I am a pastor because it is what I was called to be ... and I would say to anyone considering being a pastor, to consider that same question: can you be anything else. If you can, then that is your calling and you should follow it because that is the way God will shape and change the world through you. If you can't, then you are

called to be a pastor, and God will help you to become one.

Let us pray. Holy God, you call all your children to share your love in this world through a great variety of ways. Help all of us to be open to your call and to trust that you go with us, working in, through and even in spite of each and every one of us, every day. Amen.

My name is Pastor Megan Crouch. I am currently a pastor at Peace Lutheran Church in Gaylord, Michigan, and was ordained in 2009.

God Calls YOU!



I had thought about what it would be like to be a pastor for some time, as early as my time in high school (I even did a school project about it!). However, I went to college as a music ministry major, fearing becoming a pastor would be too stuffy. Surely it would mean I would need to be serious and solemn, and lead to a life of limits. Who would even date me? Surely, I wouldn't be able to be me. However, reflection on my experiences showed me otherwise; my confirmation pastor was a faithful and strong woman with a great listening ear. This is a woman who played "You're a Mean One, Mr. Grinch" on the piano during worship as a lead-in to one of her sermons! One of my campus pastors was a woman with as much or more energy than the college students around her, and she could be found playing in the fountain on campus on various occasions. While mentoring me, she encouraged me to not let fear outweigh my sense of call. Each of these women was truly herself as a pastor: funny, caring, strong and faithful women with personalities that shined. These dedicated women made me realize when we are called into ministry we are called with our whole

being, our whole personality, into ministry. There is not a pastor light switch to turn on or off. This realization was a gift that keeps giving. I am aware of the great diversity of personalities, thoughts and styles in pastoral leadership and also the great diversity of personalities of those we are called to serve. There is space for all of us in God's church!


Lord, we give thanks for all people and the unique gifts each individual brings to your church. May we offer our gifts to your service however you may call us. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Jeanette Bidne was ordained in 2011 and serves Trinity Lutheran Church, Blue Earth, southern Minnesota, where her husband, the Rev. Dan Foster, a United Methodist pastor, also serves rural congregations.

What Does a Woman Pastor Really Look Like?



The early years of the ordination of women were interesting and challenging but also exciting times to be in seminary and ordained. I was ordained in 1979, so I was one of the early women ordained in the Lutheran church. Many people — including Lutherans — were not even aware that the Lutheran church was ordaining women. The reception I remember receiving as a seminary student and later as a pastor was often stunned silence. There were those with strong opinions, as well, who did not hesitate to tell me that women had no place in the ministry, or that they would never go to a church with a woman pastor. I even heard a few times that women pastors were the work of the devil. Often we were labeled as "radical women's libbers." Comments often were strong, rude and very pointed, and there was no hesitancy in telling you that you were



certainly not listening to God or you would never be in ministry!

One experience I had many times, both while I was in seminary and in the first parish I served, was that of going out and talking with groups of people about what it was like to be a woman seminary student/pastor.

Questions from the groups were interesting: Can you do weddings?

Do you lead worship all by yourself?

Can you get married? Do we call you “pastress,” or what do we call you? The questions were sincere, and clearly people were trying to understand how women pastors fit in ministry and the church, but even then I found the questions were a bit amusing.

I also was asked quite frequently to go places so people could “see what a woman pastor / seminary student really looks like.” Even at the time, I found that request amusing. I remember thinking, “Just look at any woman in your congregation — that’s what we look like!” I went to Luther Seminary in St. Paul, and often women’s groups or confirmation classes would come to visit and attend chapel. After chapel on those days, one of the women students was always asked to greet them so they could “see what we looked like.” One of my male friends suggested that they should just put a shelter in front of the seminary and have a woman student in it all the time so people could just drive by and see what we looked like.

The most interesting experience I had of letting people see what a woman seminary student really looked like was when I was asked by the development office to attend the Central District (American Lutheran Church) Convention one year in Blair, Nebraska. I agreed to go and asked what I needed to do.

I was told I didn’t have to do anything, just be there. I was sure I needed to do something — sit at a table with information about Luther, talk to potential students, ask for money for tuition aid or do something while I was there, so I asked again what I needed to do at the convention. I was told, “You don’t need to do anything. Just be there, wear a collar and walk around so people can see what you look like.” So that’s what I did. I went and for two days let people look at me!

After I went places so people could see what I looked like, I always wondered what they thought. Were they surprised? Did they expect to see some unusual-looking creature? What did they expect to see? Were they disappointed when I didn’t look any different from any other woman they knew? But part of life in my early days of ministry was going places so people could look at me so they could see what a “real woman pastor or seminary student” looked like!

Thank you, Lord, for humor and strength in difficult and challenging times. Make us patient and willing to learn and let others learn with and from us. Bless your church with strong leaders, both male and female, as we move into the next 50 years of ministry. We pray this in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

*Pastor Lynn Ronsberg
I was ordained in 1979, served most of my career in northern Minnesota and currently am the administrative pastor at Sharon Lutheran Church in Grand Forks, North Dakota.*



Seeing Jesus



I'm inspired by the witness of Mary Magdalene in John 20:18: "I have seen the Lord." There in the garden that day of resurrection God was revealing a new creation, showing us through Jesus what it means for heaven to come to earth.

It's only when seen and called by name that Mary sees Jesus. Knowing that we are seen and loved is the beginning and foundation of learning to see Jesus and the world through his eyes, which leads us to take meaningful action to participate in the work of ushering in the reign of God here and now, where we are.

This is wisdom distilled from 35 years as an ordained pastor. It is the work of a lifetime — learning to see. I am working on this through two main modalities: the stories of Scripture and the stories of people.

I am grateful that my yearning to know and understand the Word of God has been consistent throughout my ministry. There is so much to learn! There are constantly new discoveries about the language, culture and religion of the Bible and therefore new insights into what God is up to through the stories of Israel and Jesus. There are always fresh connections between them as we learn more and more of the echoes of the Hebrew Bible in the New Testament.

The study of Scripture shows us the pathways of God's work in the world, always moving from wrath to compassion, oppression to justice, violence to forgiveness, to name a few. To study these pathways is to make ever

clearer the work to which we are called, the work of forgiveness, justice and love.

Studying God at work through Scripture also leads to understanding that this story is not limited to one time and one people. Rather, it is as big as the universe itself. It is a cosmic story, as God is calling us forward into a future where everything belongs, all are one and love reigns.

My other lifelong learning is in people's stories. People often see and understand the world and God very differently, and by listening to their questions, their experience, their deepest fears and needs, and their loves and hopes we can be more effective as ministers, helping people glimpse how their story fits into the big story of God's love and desire for the whole creation.

Some people see themselves as outsiders looking in, and their deepest desire is to be understood. Others see danger, obstacles and limits all around and have a deep need for safety and security. Some might see tension and chaos as pervasive and deeply desire peace and harmony while others always see the needs of others and desire to give them their help and support.

Where the work of hearing people's stories enables others to be seen and called by name, there grows the ability to see Jesus and all his works and all his ways. This is good work, and I am grateful God continues to call women of every age, sexuality, race and ethnicity into this vocation of ordained ministry.

May God give us grace to see Christ more clearly, love him more dearly and follow him more nearly, day by day. Amen.

The Rev. Karen R. Hanson, ordained Reformation Sunday, 1985, is serving in music, parish and health care ministries.

Listen



“What is God calling out of you for the sake of Christ, and for the church?” This question, first asked by a Roman Catholic sister, has continued to be for me a touchstone in considering my call to Word and Sacrament ministry. Other voices have also added to the call, with invitation, suggestion, hope, encouragement.

Listen for the voices — of other clergywomen.

In the early years of my ministry I would travel 19 miles through rural Wisconsin each Tuesday morning to share breakfast and pericope study with three other clergy women, one Methodist, one Presbyterian and another Lutheran. We shared more than coffee and French toast, often tears of frustration at challenges we were facing. Marge would remind us to keep our spirit replenished. “It’s like there is a well inside me, and I’m always called on to keep on providing for others, to ‘pump out’ compassion and care, to do the church work and lead the meetings and preach inspiration. And sometimes critical people throw clunkers down that well. Most of the time the reservoir is high enough, but sometimes when things are hard and challenges have come too often and too hard, the reservoir gets low, and someone throws a clunker in and it really hurts!” We listened, sharing tears and companionship, joys and dreams as well. And laughter! Women clergy have always been there for me in sharing vulnerabilities as well as hopes.

Listen to your own voice.

Stand up, speak up. One of the first complaints I and other early clergywomen heard was that our feminine voices could not be heard. Use the microphone. Stand up, speak up — and not just in the pulpit.

Listen to the voices of other women — in your congregation.

The women in leadership in your community and in the world as well as in church. Listen to the voices of the women in Bible study. One of my greatest blessings has been to share in the circle Bible studies of our Women of the ELCA, to share insights and to uphold one another in prayer. Share yourself openly, caringly, but share no pastoral confidences. And listen for the voices of women in other parts of the world, especially those who are living with hunger or those displaced by violence or upheaval in their homelands. Listen for the voices of the women in our own country, calling for justice.

Listen to the voices of appreciation.

Save those notes of thanks and appreciation that come. Put the touching ones in a special file. Cherish the words of those very young and those much older, and (when not physically distanced) hold their hands. Let your congregation, the people with whom you live and serve, know that you love them.

Listen to the “still, small voice” of God’s Spirit.

Take a walk, savor a poem, hum a melody, write in a journal, pray the Scripture, sit quietly with your morning coffee.

Listen to your best instincts but don’t take yourself too seriously.

In my early years of ministry, because I was often the “first” in a community, I was interviewed for newspaper or other media. Have some “talking points” ready, and a quote or two (Clergywomen are just like everyone else — we put on our pantyhose one leg at a time.) Laugh often; never assume that your voice is the only voice of wisdom in your community or congregation.

Listen to the voice of the Spirit, calling to new ventures.

What is God calling out of you for the sake of Christ and the church? Is it to Word and Sacrament? Is it to Word and Service? Is it to fulfill your ministry in the community, in the world, as a nonordained leader?

A closing word of blessing: May God bless you with sisters, siblings in faith, to listen to, to listen to you, and to lift you up.

Before ordination in 1980, Gail Heidtke served in lay ministry in Montana and Ohio and then, for 40 years, full-time, as a solo, associate and lead pastor with congregations in Wisconsin and Illinois, a single mom to a loving, now adult daughter — how did that happen? — rising from the farmlands of Wisconsin, nurturing her spirit in New Mexico and Washington Island, loving life and the congregations with whom she served, a good friend, a pretty good preacher, a faithful pastor and, with thanks to God, retiring at the end of 2020.

Blessed to Wrestle



In 1976, when the thought of going to seminary first came to me, I had never heard a woman preach, nor had I spoken with one. I had, however, read about them. There were few women in seminary and none ordained in several of the synods nearby. In many ways it was a difficult time but also exhilarating as the Scriptures opened up to me in new ways. I had two small daughters with me and a husband far away that first year. So I did some wrestling both theologically and personally.

The story of Jacob at the Jabbok in Genesis 32 became one of my favorites, where, after a night of wrestling with a mysterious being, Jacob emerges with a limp and a new name.

He will be called Israel, “for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed” (28). The text gave me hope because God named God’s own people Israel, one who wrestles, thus blessing the struggling and the wrestling I was doing.

Wrestling with God and with others is part of who we are as people of God and especially as leaders in the church. Wrestling with God was part of my call story through prayerful nights. When I told my pastor about my interest in ordained ministry, he (and nearly all were “he” back then) said that God often speaks through people who know us well. So my struggle expanded beyond nights in prayer. In the days that followed, I continued struggling with texts and with other people before, during and after seminary. Those times have left some scars but also have given me many joyful, even playful, moments of grace.

It is important, I believe, to remember that our primary call is our baptismal call, to be children of God. And our call to be part of a human family is as important as the church’s call. Nurturing relationships with family and friends may at times take precedence over the call from the church. All our precious relationships are part of God’s call. I also believe it’s important to develop relationships with people different from us. That includes people who are not part of the church, who can keep us honest and give us perspectives we need to hear. So the struggle goes on with God and with others in our prayer life and in the communities we build.

If I have wisdom to share with women and girls considering ordination, it is to discover your own particular gifts. You have them, I assure



you. God delights in you. You don't need to be someone other than who you are. (Miriam and Moses and all the rest have had their time. This is your time.) Trust that you are enough. If you are not sure what your gifts are, ask others and listen carefully. Notice and celebrate the gifts of others. Have fun and don't take yourself too seriously. Be playful in your struggles. Seek out mentors and be curious. Be oh-so-curious about the stories of others and about ideas. Keep on learning and wrestling and playing. God loves you. Take sabbath seriously and lean on your support systems. Reach out to others. You're not in this alone.

Our call is a cruciform call marked by our relationship with God and with others. As Christians, whether we are pastors, deacons or laypeople, we are called to be a community, a beloved community. Learning to live in that community with love for God, neighbor and ourselves is sometimes a struggle and always a gift. Like Jacob, we are blessed to wrestle and to endure.

May God strengthen you and give you courage to engage in struggle with God and with others so you might be a blessing to those you serve and you might live with thanksgiving and joy.

Pastor Amaretta (Amy) Onstad was ordained in 1982, the second woman ordained in South Carolina, and has served congregations as pastor in South Carolina, North Carolina, California and Georgia. She has also served as a hospice chaplain and as assistant to the bishop in the Southeastern Synod.

Birthdays: Words of Wisdom for Future Female Clergy



My mom, like her mother before her, was our church organist. Rather, on the day in question, she had been called as church organist but requested the congregation continue with interim musicians until she was able to sit on the organ bench again — after giving birth to me. Which, as she had hoped, she did in the wee hours of the morning. She was glad for my late arrival because it meant I was born on her birthday.

Years later I learned that we share our birthday not only with one another but with women's ordination in the Lutheran church: I was born Sunday, Nov. 22, 1970, in the predawn of Elizabeth Platz's ordination.

In retrospect, this reads like a mythological predestination story: marked at birth for ministry. But Christians are all marked at birth for some kind of ministry, so we can't read too much into it.

Yet my matrilineage was not the only hereditary factor: nearly every male relative on my mother's side was ordained: grandpa, uncles, great-uncles, cousins — the whole lot of them (just about) were pastors, bishops, seminary or Lutheran college presidents and professors going back for generations. Had I been a boy, many would have assumed my future was preordained.

But I was a girl.

And I can't say ordination held any great appeal.

Yet, neither did anything else.

I graduated (Luther College, of course) with an amorphous English major and theater/

dance minor with vague aspirations of choreographing. By way of avoiding any commitment or decision, I hid myself to Iceland (why not?), where God made my future only slightly less opaque: One November afternoon, as the sun “set” (it barely “rises” in November in Iceland), I sat on the back of the couch, gazing out the window and eating granola, and I heard what I can only describe as the voice of God say, “You are supposed to be a pastor.”

I lowered my spoon.

And waited.

I asked for clarification.

There was none.

After 24 hours with no further instruction, I called home. My mom answered and was immediately anxious: we didn’t call overseas back in the day unless something horrible happened. I put her at ease and then our conversation went like this (and this is verbatim):

Me: I’m calling to let you know that I’m coming home. I think I know what I’m supposed to do with my life.

Mom: [Beat.] You’re going to be a pastor, aren’t you?

We had never discussed the idea, but it was the first thing that came to her mind.

Those bizarre affirmations kept coming: my maternal grandmother (the organist) jumped out of her seat and clapped, exclaiming, “Finally a woman in the ministry!” My maternal grandfather — a pastor in the same congregation for over 40 years and one of the 10-plus living male relatives I could list as

“my family clergy” — had written on a scrap of paper, “Emmy’s going into the seminary.” My dad — having been raised in the Wisconsin Synod — feared his mother’s response until she said (initially), “I was raised to believe that shouldn’t happen, but give me some time.” We did, and about four years later, after hearing my first sermon in my home congregation, she beamed at me at the back of the sanctuary, patting my arm while holding my dad’s, saying, “I think you’ll do just fine.”

While these supportive expressions bolstered me frequently enough to stick in my memory 25 years later, perhaps the most important affirmation came from Joan, my piano teacher (who also happened to be married to my pastor). Joan’s initial response was, “What took you so long? We’ve always known you’d be a pastor.” She then asked about my call experience and, upon hearing the story, offered me the most essential and empowering advice I may ever have received: “Remember that voice and those words. They’ll try to take them from you.”

This warning felt prescient when my candidacy committee — citing a psych evaluation that “had I been a man would have been considered a strength” but as a woman was a “red flag” — delayed my candidacy for a year. (While male seminary classmates who publicly demeaned and sexually harassed more than a few of us female seminarians got through candidacy without a hiccup.) Joan’s words emboldened me when, in my first call, I found myself in a giant, packed sanctuary, speaking to a prominent national church leader who had invited comments about how the church might work to end domestic violence and other forms of oppression. When





I suggested we start with our theology, and specifically our preponderance of male-dominant, hierarchical and dualistic language and imagery for God, the leader diplomatically — and, in retrospect, a bit dismissively — said, “These things take time.” To which I curtly replied (into the microphone and shaking from head to toe), “It’s been 2,000 years.”

(Perhaps my candidacy committee’s reservations about my disregard for authority and my assertiveness were well-founded — except, of course, had I been a male, the comment would have been considered brilliantly prophetic rather than argumentatively disrespectful.)

But while my candidacy committee’s concerns may have had some merit, so did Joan’s. There have been individual slanders, divisive congregational gangs and institutional roadblocks to living into God’s call to be a pastor. I rejoice as we celebrate 50 years of women’s ordination, 40 years of Black women’s ordination and 10 years of LGBTQ+ ordination. I pray that voices from the margins grow stronger and bolder so that, in the future, we can celebrate the birthdays of whole new ways to be God’s people. I pray that the historically marginalized avoid conforming to traditional — and ancestral — molds as we gain proximity to the center and instead “remember that voice and those words” as we boldly transform the church, midwifing communities where we — and others still on the margins — can minister and live as the whole, true selves we are marked at birth to be.

Blessings of hope, vision, wisdom, boldness, courage and patience as we midwife God’s beloved community.

The Rev. Emily Meyer was ordained in 1999, has served in congregations in Oregon, Washington and Minnesota and currently serves as executive director of the Ministry Lab (theministrylab.org), a resource-curating and -creating cooperative of the United Church of Christ, The United Methodist Church, and Presbyteries of Minnesota.

“Be bold in following the Spirit’s stirring.”



I was very blessed to have an amazing pastor in college who was a great role model for what it means to be a pastor. Little did I know that it was unusual for a pastor to be a woman, because she never let on that there was any question of her call. She is a pastor, a mother, a wife, a theologian, a friend and confidant and an amazing liturgist. The Rev. Susan Briehl made me believe that God was going to use me to share that amazing grace-filled love throughout my life, regardless of who I was, because first and foremost I was a precious child of God.

After almost 30 years of ministry as both a youth director and a pastor, the wisest words I received and want to pass on is to be aware of God’s stirring in your soul. For it is in that stirring that God speaks to and encourages us to use our specific gifts to the glory of God. There will always be ministry blocks put in front of you by others because of who you are, but God says, “You are mine.” Be bold in following the Spirit’s stirring, for you never know the people and places that will be a blessing to you as you are a blessing to them. For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God’s will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives

worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God. May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light (Colossians 1:9-10).

The Rev. Heidi Hester currently serves as pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church in Pleasanton, California, and was ordained in 2003 after graduating from Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary.

May God's Breath Be Your Guiding Force



Dear child of God,

This note for you is in response to a question many women have been invited to answer: What words of wisdom would you share with a woman or girl who is considering becoming a pastor?

It is possible that you've not considered becoming a pastor. Perhaps someone has not yet invited you to consider that becoming a pastor is even an option for you. Before you wonder about life through this vocation, I'd like to invite you to simply spend time in prayer, meditation and some form of Bible study, and to be with a community of people who love God, value one another and encourage you to wonder at and share in all that is life.

Through all that is life, I have discovered that the place I hope to become has often turned out to be something way beyond my imagination. It is true that with God all

things are possible, but often the place of our becoming is not what we would have considered for ourselves.

I have experienced many vocations in life (nearly all of them were spent working with children and adults in a variety of settings), and at the glorious age of 56, I am blessed to share with you that I am a pastor and have been for almost four years. I was ordained on Jan. 27, 2017.

It is my prayer for you, dear child of God, that God's breath upon you will be your guiding force in all you do and all you hope to become. Amen.

Love and peace in Jesus,

*Christine Roe
Also called: Child of God, Mom, Sister, Wife,
Daughter, Friend, Pastor Christine and sometimes
Rev. Roe.*

Called to Be a Blessing, and Blessed to Be Called



First let me begin by saying that I am 74 years old. And with that comes years of experience spanning many changes as well as some things that have not changed very much. Let me also add that the world of today has come a long way in the ELCA, and I rejoice in the female seminarians, vicars, pastors and rostered leaders that are entering their calls in sharing their gifts with the church of the future.

I was born into a solid Lutheran family in Wisconsin. Father was the head usher for years, Mother taught Sunday school, and we were active at church every Sunday. I found my identity in Sunday school, choirs,

Christmas pageants and Luther League, and as my high school was across from the church, I hung out there after school, enjoying a succession of vicars whose main assignment was youth ministry.

Growing up under an authoritarian German father was no picnic; however, my CHURCH was my everything and God gave me a good dose of FAITH. I'm very thankful for my parents giving me the sound basis of a church education. Two older brothers were sent off to college, but the family philosophy was "girls don't need an education; they're going get married and be wives and mothers." So, at age 18 I left home and put myself through college. Please note here: My spiritual side was still strong so I immediately joined the local Lutheran church, and let me also add ... ALL pastors were male at this time, so it never occurred to me to head off in the direction of breaking the mold and aiming toward seminary.

I did graduate from college and spent 22 years as a high school teacher, spending the latter part of my teaching career in a Catholic high school where the pay was lower but spiritual benefits to living out those gifts were encouraged. Also, my life included being married, raising children, continuing growth spiritually, and finding new ways to do ministry and service toward others. It had its very difficult sides but also so many blessings along the way. I can honestly say my life was filled with JOY.

So, after four children were done with college, I decided to go to the Lutheran School of Theology (not too far from my home) to sit at the feet of the masters and learn about Jesus. Of course, as most of us know on this side of

seminary, once you're there you begin to be affirmed, and eventually, after my husband was onboard (and if you're married it's important that your spouse experiences that supportive call from God as well), I left teaching to pursue an M.Div. degree.

One of the first things I did upon entering seminary was go to the female professors who were similar in age to myself to thank them for breaking the mold and entering the seminary at a time in the late 60s when it crossed my mind but I didn't have the courage to do so. As I had never been in a church with a female pastor, I requested, each time there was a church placement, that I be with a female so I could have that experience. However, that request was never acknowledged. BUT, as the first female vicar of the church where I did my internship, after six weeks one morning when I had preached, one of the mothers going through the line at the end of the service said her little 8-year-old daughter had poked her and said, " Mommy, I'd like to be a pastor." SO, I didn't worry about that anymore. And then finally, I entered seminary at age 54 and the issues of my candidacy were that by the time I finished seminary a female at that age was probably not going to get a call, especially as my husband had two businesses in the area and I would have to restrict. My answer was "That's OK — if God is calling me, there will be a place for me either as a pastor or to use the gifts I've received here in some way." Upon my graduation I did receive a call as a solo pastor (my preference), within two months.

I'd just like to share with you women who are entering this wonderful blessing of being called by God a few thoughts:

As you can see from my story, the culture has changed a lot in the last 74 years. We cannot assume that the makeup of our congregations

has Lutheran or even church backgrounds. In fact, with busy schedules, a lot of sporadic attendance, and frequent mobility, it's literally impossible to have an accurate membership list.

The makeup of our congregations spans a variety of nationalities, cultures, colors, sexes, ages, expectations, ideas, political backgrounds and more, which offer challenges to preaching, programming, outreach and continual growth and change. This is where our pastoral conference meetings and continual education are so important. Also important are the support of spiritual directors, other pastors and colleagues, family and self-care.

Worship is continually changing to meet the needs of those we serve, yet the vital elements of worship can still be maintained in new ways. Technology has come to the forefront as we discover new ways to connect with those we serve. A prime example is the virtual worship services due to the COVID-19 situation and how all of our pastors are scrambling and learning from one another to do their best to be the church in new ways. The community aspect of church has always been so basic to what church means to us, so having to step back from that personal, physical aspect has been so difficult. Yet, here are new opportunities to make positive changes that will enhance our communities on the other side of this crisis.

As a woman, the culture I was born into, the difficulties that I had to navigate and the roles I have played differ from those of women following their calls entering the church today. Women of today have so many new opportunities. But that is not to say it will be easy, for there is a vast array of new challenges ahead, new roads to conquer,

new stories to be written. But the GOOD NEWS is this: God's truth prevails. Righteous women of God continue to be called. Each one of you comes equipped with gifts, courage, faith, hope, support, blessings and joy to be found.

May God bless you and arm you with courage, patience, wisdom, kindness, boldness and faith as you follow your call. And may you always know joy.

Pastor Jane Perkolup was ordained in June of 2005 and began her ministry as solo pastor at Faith Lutheran Church in Joliet, Illinois, through the Northern Illinois Synod, where she remained until her retirement at age 68 in 2014. She currently lives in Geneva, Illinois, where she enjoys teaching, preaching, music ministry, synod work, outreach, gardening and helping out where needed.

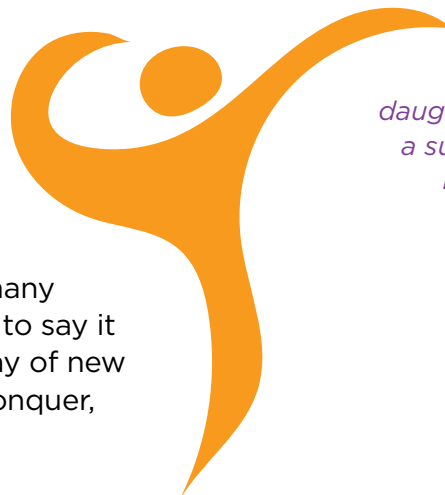
Love the People



“Love the people, love the people, love the people.” For over 30 years of ordained ministry, it was a privilege to share in their profoundest joys and heartbreaking sorrows. To give and receive light and love is the way.

May the God who creates, Jesus who saves and the Spirit within bless and keep you.

The Rev. Katheryn M. King is a daughter, a sister, a wife, a widow, a mother, a survivor, a friend, a pastor, a priest and a beloved child of God, ordained in 1984.



Eternity Is Planted With People



Yet God has made everything beautiful for its own time. He has planted eternity in the human heart, but even so, people cannot see the whole scope of God's work from beginning to end.

—Ecclesiastes 3:11 (NLT)

I was young when I first felt the call to ministry, still in high school. I can remember the exact place in the sanctuary I was when I was hit with “I should do that” when the pastor was preaching. At that age, I had no idea where my feet would carry me, what kind of pastor I would be or how much my choices would impact my heart and call. Almost six years into being a pastor, I can say with some certainty that the call doesn't so much shape our life as our lives shape our call.

My call started out rather simple. I wanted to preach and teach with a heart toward the kids that people have forgotten, the ones that fall through the cracks of church and society. Where I serve right now, as chaplain for Saint Francis Ministries, I do exactly that. How has my life shaped the call? By the choices I make within the call and the choices I have made in my life as a woman, wife and mother. I would love to tell you that all my choices have been in favor of God and the ones I love. They haven't. For better or worse, for guilt or compassion, from incredible highs to devastating moments of doubt, my choices have shaped my life. The lessons learned from each choice and consequence have changed relationships, shattered and rebuilt my faith, and given me hard-won perspective.

My perspective is that the people God places in our lives are the little glimpses of eternity that bring us strength and hope. The people who stand by us at our worst and see only the best of who we can be. The ones that tell us that we are still qualified for this call and who hold us fast in the faith. They sing back to us the love song God has written in resurrection on our hearts. Those people aren't just blessings but pieces of heaven on earth. When you answer this call, look for those people. Never let them go and never underestimate their power.

I am blessed to have a few of these people in my life. My husband, my parents, my daughter. They each bring their own gifts, and I know for a fact that I could not do this call without them. My husband keeps me honest as he holds me up behind the scenes, when I go home and am not Pastor Laura but just Laura. My parents have never stopped believing in my gift of preaching, tuning in online for worship or even leading worship with me. And my daughter. She reminds me every day of the power of presence and the true power of being adopted children of God. Pieces of eternity, right here in my life. The choices I make with them, for them, and the choices they make in return continually shape how I enter my call every day.

**May you be blessed with eternity in people in this beautiful chaos of life and call,
May you be blessed with the joy and the challenge of choice,
May the unconditional love of God forever bear you and the Spirit give you peace.**

Pastor Laura Smith, M.Div., has been ordained since 2015, serving first in a rural parish in central Kansas before transitioning to serve as chaplain for the youth at Saint Francis Ministries.

“Cling to the identity given to you by Jesus Christ in baptism.”



Reflecting on my time serving as a pastor, and now bishop, in the ELCA, I have never used the qualifier “woman” to describe myself. I am a woman, and I am in a position of leadership. I am always those two things at once (and several other things as well — spouse, parent, sibling, friend, coworker and, most importantly, baptized child of God). I don’t usually think about them as two separate identities — woman and Lutheran bishop.

But then I look around and realize that for some, these two parts of my identity are indeed incongruent. Some see my gender as an impediment to my role serving the church. Some see my gender as a nonissue in serving the church. Some want to make a big deal out of the fact that I am the first female elected to serve as bishop in the New Jersey Synod of the ELCA. Some want to downplay that reality.

Almost every Sunday, when I am visiting a congregation, a comment is made that reminds me others never forget my gender. It can be a very supportive comment such as “I am so glad my daughters get to meet you, a woman bishop” or “I never thought in my lifetime that I would meet a woman bishop.” It can be a negative comment such as “I don’t agree women should be bishops” or “I voted for the other candidate, because I just couldn’t imagine a woman in your position.” And sometimes it is a comment that leaves me wondering what is meant: “I don’t know what to call you since we’ve never met a woman bishop,” (“Bishop Bartholomew” would be the response).

Notice that all these comments include that qualifier — woman bishop. After hearing that

again and again, I began to realize that my self-understanding of serving as a bishop who happens to be a woman is not the same way others look at me. I hope one day soon I will be asked about being a leader, a pastor, a bishop. Period. I hope people will look at me, and other women serving as pastors, and remark about our faithfulness, our skills and our gifts for leading, rather than how our gender affects or plays into our roles. I hope we will affirm and welcome the ministry of qualified people in all areas of church life regardless of their gender or gender identification.

So as I think of what to say to a young girl or a woman discerning a call to be a pastor, I would say: cling to the identity given to you by Jesus Christ in your baptism — beloved child of God. That identity will ground you and lead you on unending paths of ministry. That identity will trump any qualifier others will put in front of your name or position. Whether you are called to become a pastor, a bishop, a deacon or a non-rostered member of a faith community, you will do so having first been ordained in the waters of new life for service in the world. And that qualifier makes all the difference.

Your Spirit, O God, breathes life into us and calls us into community with one another. Thank you for those who have come before us in this community of faith and for those who will follow after us. Thank you for the gift of baptism, which connects us to you and to each other. Thank you for countless witnesses to your faithfulness — pastors, bishops, deacons and non-rostered members who serve you and your people. Raise up leaders who will proclaim your name, share your love, bestow your mercy and work for your justice in the world. Bless and equip those whom you call, for the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Bishop Tracie L. Bartholomew (ordained Sept. 8, 1989), New Jersey Synod, ELCA.

Mentors Matter



When I was discerning a call to ordination, I was blessed to have a number of women mentors who had walked the journey to ordination before me. They listened to my questions, gave thoughtful answers and made themselves available when I needed them. Over the years I have done the same thing for women coming after me. It helps to process, pray and simply be with someone who understands the challenges of being a woman in a field long dominated by men.

One of the best pieces of advice I got was to listen for God's voice even when it might differ from human voices. It was not easy for me to uproot a family of five and enter seminary at the age of 37, but God called me to do it and we did it. My husband and I have also spent time with other women whose husbands were wrestling with what it meant to be a pastor's husband.

Over the last 35 years I have been blessed with chances to mentor other women, some my age and some younger, some who interned with me, some who worked on staff with me and others who simply engaged in deep conversations about being called to serve the church in a wide variety of settings.

My synod offered clergywomen retreats for a while, and those were wonderful. I also participated with other women in coming together for our own retreats. Study groups, lunches, and coffee or wine gatherings are all important in maintaining a healthy sense of humor and a reality check. Take advantage of your sisters in ministry.

If you are entering the candidacy process, a first call or a change of call, or if you are continuing in a call, look for a colleague to talk to, a mentor to share with and a friend to

laugh and cry with. If someone doesn't work out, keep looking and find a new person. It will make all the difference in your ability to function in a blessed but stressful calling.

Gracious God, bless all the women who have heard your call and answered it. Give them friends, mentors and colleagues to support them and guide them through the challenges that are a part of being a pastor. Wrap your arms around them so tightly that they can feel you every moment. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Pastor Louise Hilbert was ordained in 1989 and served in parishes until 2013, when she retired and began serving parishes as an interim pastor in the North Carolina Synod.

God in the Brokenness



Sexism is still alive and well in the church. Women in ministry experience countless microaggressions every day. It happens in small, almost unnoticeable ways (when the only woman in the room is asked to be the keeper of notes). It happens in bigger, more obvious ways (when the only woman in the ministerial association is the one who keeps being "forgotten" in the email chain of invitations and notifications). And it happens in ways that are overt sexual harassment (when women pastors visit men in hospitals or care facilities and are invited to crawl into bed with them).

Like many of my sisters, I have countless stories to tell. I will share just two. One gives me hope. The other, even two years later, brings me near tears.

About 18 months into my first call, an octogenarian woman approached me immediately after worship, saying, “Pastor, I owe you an apology.”

Unaware of her having wronged me in any way, I responded with a confused “Well, thank you. But why?”

“When we were in the call process,” she told me, “I voted against you because you’re a woman. You have taught me I was wrong.”

That woman, who had spent more than two-thirds of her life in a church that did not allow women to serve as pastors, found herself changed by nothing more than me being a pastor, preaching, teaching and being present among the people. God is using my sisters and me!

The single, most painful experience I’ve had happened as I was preparing to lead a funeral. Minutes before worship was scheduled to start, I walked through a crowded narthex, fully vested for worship, including both alb and stole, gently encouraging people to move into the sanctuary and find a seat. As I did so, a man I didn’t know (old enough to have been my father) grabbed me, forcibly pulled my body full-length against his own, and said, “Come on, now, Pastor. I just gave you a little wiggle, didn’t I? Even if I didn’t, lie me to and tell me that I did.”

This happened in a crowded narthex. The response from the crowd? Nothing. I was, for all intents and purposes, assaulted as I prepared to lead worship in the place where God had called me, and no one even noticed.

With only minutes to recover from the tears brought on by shock and pain, I stepped into our vestry to gather myself before beginning the funeral service. Worshipers, I am certain, saw my tears as a reflection of grief for the

one whose death had brought us together. I knew otherwise.

At the end of the day, I went home still carrying the shock and pain of the assault. Two days later, the new widow called me to thank me for the “beautiful service” I had led for her husband, and I knew that, regardless of what I was feeling in the immediate aftermath of assault, God was present in and through me.

My words of wisdom: You will experience sexism and abuse. No matter how often it happens, you will not be prepared for it to happen again.

Know that, even as the brokenness of the world makes itself known, God is using you. God has called you—who you are, as you are—to embody the love of our Savior, to proclaim the good news of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection, and (sometimes) to surprise the world with how God works!

Holy and ever-living God, you care for the world in its brokenness, even as you call us to be better. Enlighten us and make us able to see and overcome our sin. Guide us in forgiving the sins of others. Give us hope when all seems lost. Use us to help one another to see your face in all of humanity. Amen.

The Rev. Beth J. Costlow is a wife and mother first, pastor next; she was ordained on Oct. 11, 2003.



The Most Natural Thing I've Ever Done



Becoming a pastor (who happens to be a woman) is one of the most natural things I've ever done.

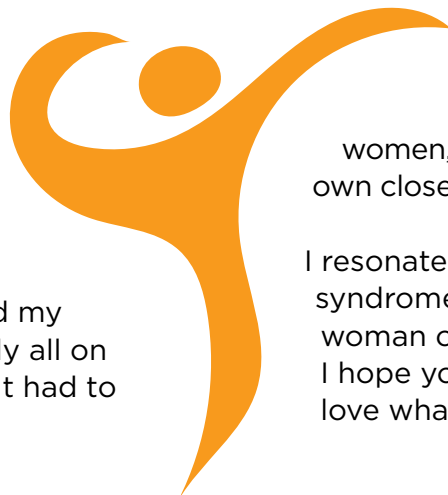
This is true despite the fact that I had almost no pastors to look up to in my childhood who were female.

It is true despite the fact that I went to Catholic school, where women were, of course, not allowed to be priests at all. While I was raised in an ELCA church, no one even mentioned seminary to me in high school (this was the early 2000s) even though I was the only youth assisting minister at my church at the time and my favorite subject in school was theology.

It is true despite the fact that when I was a child, my mom said she didn't like woman preachers. My grandfather, who also went to an ELCA church, expressed his belief to me that women should not be in senior leadership roles. Let it be known that I love both of these people dearly, but I will still never forget those words.

Those words were said by people in a church that, on paper, should have been one of the most women-in-leadership-friendly churches in town. If this was my experience in a "progressive" church, I grieve for women and girls in churches who are still told that they are not made to be a leader and that they are not made to be pastoral, despite their obvious gifts. This is a tragedy.

I have no pastors in my family, save a distant cousin. I had to find my way to pastoral ministry seemingly all on my own. The tug of the Holy Spirit had to be enough, and it was.



I went to college to double-major in ballet and psychology, but quickly felt that psychology was not fulfilling. When I met a chaplain at a hospice organization for which I was volunteering, I knew right then and there that pastoral ministry, and more specifically chaplaincy, was where God was calling me. This was affirmed by my campus pastor, now bishop, Mike Girlinghouse, who was instrumental in my formation. I switched my major to religious studies (and, yes, finished my ballet degree, too), and the rest, as they say, is history.

To be a pastor is to be pastoral (among many things). To be pastoral is to shepherd. To shepherd is to guide and to love and to take care of.

I don't want to say that these are "feminine" things ... but I can tell you one thing for certain: they are most definitely not not feminine things.

I'll say it again: becoming a pastor is one of the most natural things I have ever done.

Sometimes I hear pastors, and especially pastors who are women, speaking of impostor syndrome. Perhaps they don't ever quite feel like a "real pastor," despite going through schooling and a candidacy process that is identical to that of any other pastor in the church. Perhaps they feel this way because of all the little slights that we, as women, absorb ... sometimes even by our own closest family members.

I resonate with women who have impostor syndrome, but I do not have it. To any woman or girl who is considering ministry: I hope you hear my story when I say that I love what I do and I think I'm pretty good

at it. The fact that women have been left out of ministry, and left out of a profession that is so obviously well-suited for what women bring, is ridiculous. I could almost laugh. Almost.

The day my grandfather heard me preach for the first time, he cried and so did I. In his late-80s he became a “believer.” My mom has most certainly come around, too.

Thank God that people change. Thank God that women have gone before us to pave the way and that women continue to follow the call of the Holy Spirit against the odds.

May God bless you and keep you bold, resilient and always agitating for justice. Perhaps you are who you think you might be. Perhaps you actually are the embodiment of what it means to be pastoral. Perhaps you were made for this. Amen.

The Rev. Kristin Reed Klade was ordained to the ministry of Word and Sacrament in 2015, currently serves as a staff chaplain at Cook Children’s Medical Center and helps lead Kyrie Pub Church in Fort Worth, Texas.

Tips for Ministry



I always wanted to be a pastor; at least after my elementary school brief brush with wanting to be a vet, like my best friend. Today she’s a vet and I’m a pastor, so I guess we were some of the “lucky” ones who always knew what we wanted to “do when we grow up.” Ordained now since 2003, I can say pastoring didn’t turn out as I expected. Immediately, I learned I did not receive the respect I had grown up seeing given to my white, older, male pastor at my home church. The sexism in the church has

been overwhelming and at times debilitating. But I’m still here because of the kids—mine and yours. They need the gospel. I still need the gospel. So my advice to my fellow gospel-lovers out there and all folks considering ordained ministry includes engaging in spiritual direction, valuing trusted loved ones and having a serious hobby.

Thankfully, I was introduced to spiritual directors while in seminary, at a greatly reduced rate, and have kept up with it all these years. Their role as listener, fellow journeyer, spiritual resource and reminder that I’m not crazy has been invaluable. In addition to being a sounding board for professional ministry, they have walked with me in my personal journey of faith, ego dissolution and openness.

Trusted loved ones in the form of family and friends ground my priorities. I enjoy using my gifts in my profession. However, several aspects of my profession have not turned out how I planned, which I ascribe to both church politics and the Holy Spirit. This is why valuing relationships with trusted loved ones is key, especially when we are prone to exaggerate our jobs’ importance because we’re doing “God’s work.” Just as creation is God’s first incarnation, family is our first calling (whether we are ordained leaders or anybody else; whether we are single, married or divorced; however we define “family”). Nurturing and committing ourselves to relationships with trusted loved ones outlives any professional call and is worth our prioritization.

And serious hobbies are not to be overlooked. I add “serious” because “hobby” can sound too casual or unimportant. I think hobbies are





crucial because they are where we lose ourselves in pure joy. My serious hobby is gardening. Nobody has to like my garden but me. As long as I don't go over our family budget or hurt the home value in the process, I can sweat in my garden to my heart's delight. And we all need this sort of "play" as adults, especially in a profession that holds so many people's hearts, opinions and needs. Is it a coincidence that Jesus goes to gardens to pray; perhaps to talk to his favorite flowers, smell his favorite herbs, rest besides the swaying grasses — all of whom are safe and trusted confidants to him?

My advice of 17 years is this: Take God seriously. Take yourself and, yes, even your call less seriously. Invest in a solid spiritual director. Love those who love you. Play with pure joy in the garden or wherever you find it. I'm grateful to have you on this journey of loving the gospel and sharing in it together!

Be yourself. You are beautiful! God loves you.

Janelle Rozek Hooper, ordained since 2003, serves as program director for ministry with children for the ELCA and as pastor of faith formation at New Hope Lutheran Church in Keller, Texas; she loves being a wife to Brad and mother to Sophia and Soren.

Growth, Honesty and Safety



I grew up with a mother and a father who would read the Bible with us before bed on winter nights. As my siblings and I grew older, we were encouraged to read Scripture out loud. We couldn't afford books. I look back on these memories and see that I also was privileged to listen to my parents, aunts and uncles talk about Scripture, faith and life events. The conversations often got emotional, but they taught me how to argue on the issues and not use personal attacks. This was an important experience to have for my formation of faith and my character.

In college, I thought I was to become a psychologist. In my final year, I had become disappointed with the philosophy behind my studies. At the exact same time, the college campus minister I was working for on campus approached me. We had never talked about my future, but he simply said, out of thin air, "You should become a minister." After days of prayer, I approached the campus minister in his office. We figured out how to get enrolled into a seminary. I had not known women were ordained before this and love this journey I have now.

During the first interview process with a congregation, I had felt like my abilities were being critiqued. I do believe it probably was because of the way I presented myself. Now I understand that the interview process is a negotiation between what a congregation needs and the skills I have to offer. This must be an honest conversation, or it is set up to fail. I do believe we should always be willing to grow in our abilities but to



be honest about asking for assistance in our endeavors.

The story I would like to share is one that I hope that a woman who is called to become an ordained minister might read. I have had to learn to let someone from the church know where I am going and the times I expect to visit.

Yes, this is about accountability and safety. Many people are unaware of what ministers do throughout the week. We are seen on Sundays and most often Wednesdays, but the rest of the time it becomes a one-to-one ministry.

A woman in tears made a request for me to come out to her house for a conversation. After rushing out to the family farm, I was immediately ushered to a seat at the dining room table with the woman and two of her grown children. I listened to their heartbreak of family struggles and fear for the one family member who was not at this conversation. It was her husband and the children's father. Quickly, the husband pulled his truck into the drive while we were talking. We could see him full of rage as he got out. The two adult children ran out the back of the house. His wife and I stood at the dining room table as he came in with a commanding and angry voice. No one from the church knew where I was or whom I was visiting. I felt the fear enfold the woman who had been crying with me earlier. We let him express that he felt betrayed and furious that I, as the minister, was learning about their family dynamics that he felt should be kept as a secret.

After standing through his sharing of feelings, I asked him to sit down with us. He had refused. I have to say that I was young, inexperienced

and fearful. We stood as I let him know that I heard what he was saying. Without apology, I shared that his wife was truly worried for him and wanted him to be happy. She understood in this that I had heard her as well. As a human being full of fear, I truly believe God was speaking to this couple. I had no earlier experience or knowledge as to how to act in this instance. After our conversation with raw emotion, he had agreed to get help, and within three days he did go in for professional help. I share this story because it is the cornerstone of each visit I make with everyone. It is important to ask about the topic and discuss the proper place for a conversation. The office administrator is a great resource to help keep the pastor's schedule so that others may know when I will be free for a meeting or visit. The office administrator is also a great resource to check that I am keeping to my schedule if the office gets a call that I have not shown up. As a woman pastor, I believe in having a conversation with our coworkers about safety. If we do not show up to our next appointment or the office when we are expected, calls go out and the schedule is the first place to check.

May God always be our first protector and comforter.

May God fill us with strength to listen to another's heart.

May God humble us to know we are servants so that God may shine through all that we do and say. Amen.

*Pastor Sheri Lodel
Calvary Lutheran Church, Grand Island, Nebraska,
and Our Saviour's Lutheran Church, Dannebrog,
Nebraska. Ordained June 22, 1997, Faith Lutheran
Church, Valders, Wisconsin. Studied: Carthage
College, Kenosha, Wisconsin; Luther Seminary, St.
Paul, Minnesota.*

Keep On Keeping On



It was 1956 — my sophomore year at Valparaiso University. I loved the old wood chapel at Valpo. The fragrance of the wood was peace-giving. I often sat, after daily chapel, just enjoying the heartwarming vibrations of this simple chapel. In a quick moment something happened. I got the overwhelming sense — a “call,” I guess we would say — to be a pastor. I told my religion professor at the time. He was gracious and, in a very kind way, with a tender smile on his face, said, “Oh, Carol, God isn’t calling women to ordained ministry. Perhaps you should think of something else.”

Thirty-three years later I attended a conference at Valparaiso for pastors and ministry students. My former religion professor was the speaker.

I approached him after the conference and told him who I was and what he had said to me way back then. Of course, he had trouble remembering a student from 33 years prior. But this time he said, “Oh, Carol, I apologize for what I said to you so long ago. I’ve changed.”

On July 19, 1987, I was ordained to the ministry of Word and Sacrament by the Lutheran Church in America — just months before the ELCA was formed. I told the professor that. He affirmed it. Indeed, he had changed.

Words of wisdom for women in ministry: do not give up. If you hear the call, it might be years before the call is realized. It took me 30. I had to believe in myself and the truth of my call. Don’t lose hope or confidence in yourself or in the Holy Spirit.

I have been a pastor for 33 years — now 63 years on from the “call” as a freshman in college.

It is humbling to be actively working in ministry at 83 years old, still. It is humbling working in ministry. I’ve learned that the people of God have a powerfully strong faith. They are the ones that keep the church alive, even when I, from time to time, have faltered.

The Bible verse I’d like to leave with everyone at every stage of life and in every imaginable position is from Hebrews 3:15 (KJV): “If ye will hear God’s voice, harden not your hearts.”

May the God who has called, enlightened and sanctified you lead you ever deeper into God’s love.

Carol Soderholm, Union Theological Seminary 1984.

“I stand on the shoulders of women who went before me.”



I stand on the shoulders of women who went before me to smooth my path to ordination. As a third grader, I received my first Bible from my female pastor. I was confirmed by a female pastor. I was married by a female pastor. And in my first call, I followed in the footsteps of a female pastor, who retired out of the congregation. I consider myself blessed that it was my own personal hang-ups, rather than being a woman, that kept me from pursuing ordination initially. It took a lot of people, lay and clergy, women and men, pestering me for awhile to convince me to go to seminary. Now I can’t imagine doing anything else.

My first call was serving a newly yoked two-point parish in rural Nebraska. The larger congregation had been served well by two female pastors before me, but I was the first female pastor for the smaller congregation 16 miles down the highway. In a conservative area, this could have been difficult, but I found both congregations embraced me and respected me in the role of pastor even though I was young and female. A highlight was when one of the lay leaders of that little congregation did some updating to the model wooden church he had made to put out at Christmastime each year. Inside the model church was a Christmas tree with Christmas lights, people in the congregation singing with hymnals, and a pastor up-front with long brown hair and high heels, clearly a lady pastor. "It's you!" my parishioner proudly told me!

I am now in my third call, and as I look back on my years of ordained ministry, I am grateful that my gender has not been much of a barrier in my ministry. My congregation supported me when I took parental leave twice after giving birth to my children. My current congregation built into my letter of call not only financial support for childcare but also flexible working hours, so the congregation knows that, unless it is an

emergency, between 3 and

6 p.m. on weekdays, I am spending time with my family. For the most part, the congregations I have served see my experience as a young mom and a wife as a gift, because I can relate to other working parents and women of all ages.

For any woman considering being a pastor, I would encourage her to listen to the external call from others as well as to the internal passion

to serving God and the church within. Being a pastor is hard work, and without a passion and a strong sense of call, your ministry will suffer. In addition, find a supportive network, ideally with other women in ministry, but supportive male colleagues are great, too! Take time for yourself. Jesus said it best when he asked us to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves.

In closing, I'd like to share a poem by Emily Dickinson that was given to me at my ordination by a female colleague as a blessing for all women who dare to follow this calling to serve God and the church:

**She's happy, with a new Content—
That feels to her—like Sacrament—
She's busy—with an altered Care—
As just apprenticed to the Air—**

**She's tearfu—if she weep at all—
For blissful Causes—Most of all—
That Heaven permit so meek as her —
To such a Fate—to minister.**

Rebecca Christine Lund Sheridan was ordained as an ELCA pastor in 2011 and has served congregations in Nebraska as well as the Nebraska Synod as director for evangelical mission. She currently serves as pastor of Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church in Syosset, New York.



**“Be bold. Have courage.
God is calling you.”**



My advice to women, girls, nonbinary and gender non-conforming people who are considering calls to ministry is that it's OK to not always be Jonah. Many of us have reluctance as part of our call stories; that's just real talk, and we should keep telling that part. However, if we only talk about ministry like it's something people are forced into — kicking and screaming and running away from Nineveh — that's not very encouraging or truthful. We're leaving out an important part of the story: that you have joy in your call and that you are good at what you are doing and being called to do for the church. I would love to see us — women, girls, nonbinary and gender-conforming folk — shift the culture in the church to something healthier for everyone.

You don't have to apologize for the joy you feel in your sense of call; you don't have to make yourself or your gifts invisible or try to take up the very least amount of possible space when you talk about your call and your hopes for serving the church. Avoid the trap of false humility and instead find ways you can be open about and self-aware of what you know and are skilled in as well as what you don't know, need to learn and do better, and are deeply curious about. As a bishop I would love to hear you say: “I want to be a pastor!” or “I am so looking forward to being a deacon” or “If I'm ever nominated, I would go through the election process for bishop.” Be bold. Have courage. God is calling you. The church and the world need you.

Gracious God, thank you for the joy of your calling, even in the midst of times when that calling upends our lives, defies our expectations and gives us all kinds of trouble. Give us courage to tell the whole story of our call and of who you made and are forming us

to be. Strengthen us to serve the world and the church with honesty, curiosity and all the gifts you've given each of us, and to celebrate the leaders you are lifting up for ministry in different ways. In the name of Jesus, who calls us by name. Amen.

The Rev. Anne Edison-Albright serves as bishop of the East-Central Synod of Wisconsin; she was ordained in 2010.

Memories ... Good and Not So Good



To serve for over 30 years as an ordained Lutheran pastor has been a full-of-grace life but also one with times of sorrow and frustration. In this time of celebration, I honor all those who are no longer rostered, for a variety of reasons, and, therefore, their ministry may be overlooked. I do trust that the God of Easter will not let the “Good Fridays” of pastoral ministry have the last word.

Well-prepared and confident, I graduated from Wartburg Seminary in June 1983. I did not expect to wait for a call (typical for women in those days) because I had served as treasurer and president of a 1,000-member congregation in Southern California, was joyfully affirmed by them, worked as human resources officer at a bank, served as treasurer of the American Lutheran Church's South Pacific District (including district council and executive committee), and had excellent grades and references from professors and my internship supervisor. However, as my name went out to congregations for nearly a year, the frequent response was “We aren't ready for a woman pastor yet.” The résumé didn't matter because “female” negated all.

After a year, I was called to serve as associate pastor at St. Andrew's, San Diego, California. On my first Sunday, in September 1984, the senior pastor announced he had received a letter of call to another congregation. Our calls were not coterminous, and he had not told me or the Council he was interviewing because he was confident I could handle pastoral ministry if he left. After six weeks, he announced he had accepted the call. After worship, "Joe," a member of the congregation, followed me into my office. I had a feeling about the conversation and kept my liturgical robe and stole on for a visual aid of pastoral identity.

"Pastor, the Bible says that when you have something against someone you should first go to them directly. I have something against you, so I need to talk to you. When you were called as associate pastor, I decided I could 'hear the word from you' because you would be working under a man. Now that he is leaving and you will be on your own for a while, I don't think I can."

"Why not?" I asked.

"You are not biblically submissive to your husband because you don't use his last name."

In my feminist confidence of those days I replied, "That's a strange criteria since they didn't use last names in Bible times." He sputtered, we continued talking calmly (I didn't give an inch!) and he never came back with two or three witnesses.

Over the year of this "unintentional interim," it became clear to the congregation that I could indeed serve fully and competently in the

pastoral office. So, when the congregation called another older, more experienced man, not as senior pastor but as copastor, they also called me as copastor. Within the next year, "Joe" was in my office again, this time telling me that only one of their pastors was pulling their weight ... me. For many of us, it was our actual service as pastor that convinced reluctant people that it was indeed time for women pastors.

I share this story to remember that confident, self-assured feminist in her early 30s who was not intimidated by "Joe." In my prior work at a bank, I attended and then led seminars on women in leadership that explored the experience of the women in upper management of corporations in the 1950s. This gave me perspective of women's leadership in male-predominant environments, which the church was in the 1980s (we were not covered by affirmative action laws!).

There were other challenges with male-female dynamics that had more complex outcomes than "Joe's" talk with me. After five years of serving in the first congregation, I went on leave from call for six years while I did graduate study in biblical studies, had a baby, adopted a ten-year-old, served five interims and had my name given to six congregations. Of these six, two refused to interview me, two had laypeople on the call committee with strong objections for a female pastor, and another ended with an act of collegial sabotage within the call committee. In 1996, I was called to a small, struggling congregation. Twenty-one years later, I retired from that small, strong missional community, having led their transformation. As far as I know, no one was glad to see me retire! At that time, of the six congregations where my candidacy was proposed, only one was stronger than when they turned me down.

A word of wisdom I offer to a woman or girl who is considering becoming a pastor is that she should become familiar with feminism, with the realities of patriarchy/sexism/misogyny in the past and today, and then develop the analysis and skills needed to flourish in the very complex and demanding work of pastoral ministry. Reality is that complexities and stumbling blocks are inevitable in life and ministry. Sometimes they are of our own making, and we need to own those times. I readily admit that I made mistakes in 32 years of pastoral ministry. But sometimes, it was NOT me but the patriarchy, sexism and misogyny that are still a part of our life together. Without understanding what the church has seen and taught about women and how/why 90% of Christians do not welcome women as leaders in their faith communities, we can be overcome by criticism and challenges that are not of our own making and which often cannot be solved by being better, smarter or more experienced. There are too many women no longer serving as pastors because of the attitudes and actions of anti-female colleagues, laypeople and systems. Sadly, many women will not be writing their story because they did not make it through these struggles.

Holy Mystery who lived among us as Jesus of Nazareth and who as Holy Spirit moves gently and powerfully among us today, bless all those whose ministry as pastors ended in conflict, discouragement or despair. May your light continuously shine in their lives and in the church and world to lift up the full humanity of women and girls created in your image. Amen.

Gloria Espeseth, ordained in 1984, served San Diego congregations for 32 years until her retirement in 2016, in synodical and churchwide committees, and in San Diego community organizations (including coaching T-ball and PTA president).

Don't Give Up



My call came very early and, with it, the warnings. I was born an at-risk preemie, and the attending nurse at that Catholic hospital baptized me right then ... only seconds old. I heard this story over and over throughout my life ... you didn't live even one minute before you were baptized — God has something special for you to do! So I watched and listened to what that special thing would be.

The most special thing I saw as a child was the priest saying Mass and serving communion ... sharing Jesus with others. By the time I was old enough to reason, I knew God indeed had something special for me. I was called to be a priest, a parish pastor who would share Jesus with others.

Remember Necco Wafers? This was a favorite candy with lots of pieces and different flavors and colors in every roll. I would trade with my friends and siblings until I had all the white and pale yellow ones, and then, when I had a good stash, I would play church using the candy as communion wafers. My siblings were a willing congregation — they liked communion! When I answered the “what do you want to be when you grow up” question, I was always warned ... change your dream. Only boys can be priests ... you can't be a parish pastor.

My next big warning came when I was in my third year of college. I was a theology major. Only one other woman in the class of guys was heading to seminary. I had joined a convent after graduating high school, thinking that, since I couldn't be a priest, being a nun might be my path to parish ministry. My faculty adviser knew the church better than my naïve 20-year-old self. I was warned ... get a teaching degree so you will be employable.



But times were changing, and I did get a church job ... with some teaching ... but I was working in a congregation. My boldness took me to grad school, where I studied liturgy and pastoral ministry. My theological education and pastoral experience caught the attention of a bishop who offered me a pastoral associate position. Although I was never allowed in the pulpit on a Sunday and absolutely never behind the altar, I was doing pastoral work. In the early 80s I was invited to join a newly forming team ministry in the rural part of South Dakota ... an experimental program to solve the priest shortage problem. I moved into the parsonage attached to the church and was named pastoral administrator for a two-point parish. But I was warned: don't look too priestly in your parish work. Permission is given to preach, but make sure it is less often than the visiting priest. And always defer to the priests ... they are the bosses. And never refer to yourself as pastor ... you aren't ordained ... and won't be!

I did that work for 15 years, and I loved it! I was loved and respected by the church members and the priests I worked with. But the new bishop wasn't interested in having women in pastoral positions. This was about that same time the Pope wrote a letter to the bishops of the world titled: "On Certain Questions Regarding the Collaboration of the Non-ordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of Priest." So much for the priesthood of all believers! That letter, all 32 pages of it, could be summed up with one remark: "Collaboration? There is to be none." The bishop respected my work, but he wanted to offer me a new job ... any job ... just not a parish job. Warning:

Pastoral ministry is only for the ordained ... you aren't ordained ... and won't be.

The windows in the Catholic church were closing, and I couldn't breathe. My colleagues in the Lutheran church kept inviting me to join them.

I wrote a letter to the Pope asking to be released from the vows I made as a nun so I could attend a Lutheran seminary. From my earliest memories I knew the "something" God wanted me to do was to live out my baptism by preaching the gospel, by bringing others to the living water that is Jesus Christ. For me that meant being ordained and being a parish pastor. This was not a compelling argument for Rome. They wrote a response to my request to the bishop and to the president of my religious congregation. They were told I was not to be allowed to resign. They were to banish me. You can't quit ... you're fired! Rome would not give an indult but an excommunication. My convent sisters cried at having to obey this letter from Rome.

Like Martin Luther, I didn't mean to get kicked out. I wanted to do what my baptism called me to do ... preach the gospel ... bring people to Jesus Christ. Rome warned me: attending a Lutheran seminary with the goal of ordination would result in excommunication. I was officially kicked out of the Roman Catholic Church. The letter stated my crime: "She has notoriously abandoned the faith." I still take issue with that! I was certainly not famous enough to be notorious, and I was not abandoning anything ... especially my faith. But Rome had spoken.

I was out the door of the Roman church but into the welcoming arms of





the Lutheran church. I completed seminary, was ordained and was called to be a parish pastor. The warnings I got throughout my life were stepping stones ... not roadblocks. I am living out my baptism and doing what I believe God has called and gifted me to do.

A number of years ago I had a full-circle moment. The ELCA Conference of Bishops met in San Diego. The Roman Catholic Diocese graciously offered the beautiful Mission Basilica to be used for the ELCA Epiphany service, and I was to be the presider. There I was, in full vestments, standing behind the altar in a Roman Catholic church leading 65 Lutheran bishops and their spouses in prayer, sharing not Necco Wafers, but Jesus.

May all your warnings be stepping stones. May the waters of your baptism wash you every day of this journey. May you be sustained by the Holy Spirit to carry out your ministry with joy and a spirit of bold trust. May you be strengthened to serve God's people, build up God's church and glorify God's Name. May you be blessed. Amen.

Karen LaFollette Marohn attended Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary, was ordained in 2003 and continues to live out her call as a parish pastor in San Diego, California.

I Was Called to Serve



“No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing [God] will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it”

—(1 Corinthians 10:13).

I grew up in a small town in East Tennessee. My father was a pastor. One of the first things I remember him teaching me was how to pray. My mother was a lay theologian. She instilled in me a love for God's word. My grandmother was the first ecumenical person I knew. She introduced me to my Presbyterian and Methodist sisters and brothers. However, there were no female pastor role models in my life. I sensed a call from God before I entered elementary school. What could it mean? I imagined myself a Sunday school teacher, perhaps a missionary, but not a pastor. My undergraduate education is in business administration. When the Spirit began to stir my heart toward public ministry, I was not sure what to do. My father had mentored my brother to become a pastor, not me. Yes, God has a sense of humor. I was called to serve.

The Spirit began to lead me to the Lutheran Church in America. The national offices were in New York and Philadelphia. I had moved to Philadelphia after getting married. I attended the Urban Theological Institute at Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia. Afterward, I completed my Master of Divinity and Doctor of Ministry degrees at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. It was a long journey. I was a part-time

student, working for the ELCA churchwide organization. I was ordained Oct. 20, 1996.

I began serving the Lutheran Church in America in 1981. I have served the ELCA churchwide organization in various capacities since 1987. I have been blessed to be a part of many initiatives of this church, such as the “Call to Discipleship,” Evangelism Strategy and “Proclaiming the Power” events; the “Use of the Means of Grace” document; the This Far by Faith hymnal; the Living Into the Future Together Task Force; and the Called Forward Together in Christ process.

Until recently, I served as an executive assistant to the presiding bishop and executive for administration. This call held both my passion for administration and pastoral service. I am thankful to serve as a pastoral associate at Bethel Lutheran Church in Chicago. My husband and I raised our daughter there and gained a second daughter. Bethel has been a place of nurture and support for my ministry. I have the opportunity to engage with the congregation in pastoral duties while serving the wider church in my administrative role. One of the passions during my faith journey has been leadership development. I strongly believe in leadership “from the inside out.” In the waters of our baptism God calls us to love and serve the neighbor as our highest vocation. We are given gifts for living out our purpose and the promise that God will always be with us.

In 2012, I climbed to the peak of Mount Kilimanjaro to raise money to stop malaria. The name of the peak is Uhuru, which means “freedom.” Climbing to the peak was the most difficult physical thing I had ever done. On the mountain, I learned that I am stronger

than I thought. I learned that it is wise to accept help when it is offered and ask for help when it is needed. I also learned that some things are accomplished by sheer will and determination.

Through my journey of discernment, preparation and placement in the ELCA, God has been my help, my strength and song. The opportunities and challenges have both been numerous. Many sisters and brothers have encouraged me along the way. I am grateful for each one.

I am especially grateful for personal mentors who have now crossed over to the other side: Ms. Agalice Miller, Ms. Carolyn Green, the Rev. Dr. Will Hertzfeld and the Rev. Albert “Pete” Pero, Ph.D. I remain thankful to God for the opportunity to serve.

The ancestors watched with bated breath. So much breathing they had done. Hoping for the dream to open. Would it be today? Would this woman mark change? Sorrow and sweetness sat together. Joy looked on and awaited invitation. How long? Standing on strong shoulders. Looking back to move forward. Listen, God is calling. The breath of life gives life. The promise remains. God is faithful.

The Rev. Dr. Wyvetta Bullock most recently served as the executive for administration in the ELCA Churchwide organization. She also serves as a pastoral associate at Bethel Lutheran Church in Chicago.





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