Ministry in the Last Best Place

I moved to Montana in 1983 without a call. My first call had been in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to a congregation and campus ministry. My husband, Turner Graybill, was eager to get back home to Montana to join the family law firm and run for office. We were ready to start a family, so we took the plunge off the east coast and everything that was familiar to me. I soon received a call to First English in Great Falls, the first woman to serve an LCA congregation in Montana. I gave birth to our daughter, Rhiannon a year later, and a year after that, Turner was diagnosed with a serious brain tumor. Although I resigned from my call, I stayed connected with the heartbeat of the church by serving on the Montana Synod transition team. Through that experience I learned a lot about the history of Lutherans in Montana, and the different traditions that came together to make up the Montana Synod of the ELCA.

In 1987, at the Constituting Convention of the Montana Synod, I was elected Synod Secretary, an office that I held for twelve years. A year and a half later, just before the birth of our son Raphael, I was called to be the Director of the Northern Rockies Institute of Theology, a position I held for 18 years. When the ELCA started, the plan was to have a continuing education center (like NRIT) for every synod. In reality, when I started with NRIT (which was already well-established), there were about 30 continuing education centers across the ELCA. By the time I finished with NRIT (which is still going strong), NRIT was the only of its kind left. NRIT changed with the times and with the needs of the constituents. We have a venerable tradition of keeping things going with duct tape and baling wire when others might give up.

NRIT was a part-time call. While serving NRIT, I continued to be Synod Secretary, and was involved in several churchwide committees and task forces. I was active in the Montana Association of Churches (MAC) and served as President.

In 2002 Bishop Rich Omland invited me to serve as Associate to the Bishop. I continued with NRIT during the 5 years I served in that capacity. In 2007 I was elected Bishop, the first woman to serve as Bishop in the Synod. The Synod had been through some ups and downs, like the rest of the ELCA. An early draft of a human sexuality statement had caused some consternation, as had the first ecumenical agreements the ELCA entered into--the Formula of Agreement with the Reformed Churches, and the Call to Common Mission with The Episcopal Church. In 2009, many congregations of the Montana Synod were deeply troubled by the ELCA's actions in the area of human sexuality, and proceeded to take steps to leave the ELCA. The disruption was severe for several years. But the Synod Council regrouped, established priorities for the Synod. (Meet the future boldly; Serve the world, especially the poor and those in need; Deepen faith and witness; Promote unity; Support congregations). We adopted an Apology to the Tribal nations, and took it to several tribal councils.

My path from ordination in Central Pennsylvania in 1979 to Bishop of the Montana Synod may not have been predictable. But as I look back on the many experiences I had while working part time, I see how so many of those became invaluable in my work as Bishop. I am grateful for the opportunity to have served. In retirement I continue to work with the ELCA on the 50th anniversary of women's ordination, and with the ongoing Repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery.