MT Synod, WO50

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“Women *can* preach!” I was greeted after worship with a huge smile and a big hug from my new coworker and senior pastor of two weeks. Thus began a 4½ year ministry in my first call as associate pastor at Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Kalispell, MT.

I had not intended to become a pastor when I entered seminary. My goal was to be equipped to teach Bible in order to teach in a higher institute of learning. Besides, I had grown up with the belief that only men could be pastors, not women. However, during the four years of seminary training, I was encouraged by professors and pastors to seriously consider pastoral ministry. I submitted my name for consideration of a pastoral call but I was not fully convinced of God’s calling to me as a pastor until after my first worship service at Bethlehem when I realized yes, God could use me as a pastor.

When I was assigned the Montana Synod for my first call, I thought God was playing a joke on me. Since I was single at the time, I had requested to be assigned to a synod in the Midwest where I would be close to family and friends and a culture I knew. But once I was in the Montana Synod, it became clear to me that it was not a joke or a mistake but clearly God’s leading and guiding.

It was in Montana where I met my husband and partner in ministry and life, Pastor Gary Gilthvedt. It was in Montana that my eyes were opened to the beauty, majesty, awe and wildness of creation and creatures. It was in Montana where I began a new acquaintance with our land’s indigenous peoples.

I recall the supportive network of pastors in the Flathead Conference and Montana Synod. The pastors’ text studies were engaging, relevant and challenging. The comradery was significant. The women pastors in the Montana Synod were intentional and supportive.

There is a special place in a pastor’s heart for one’s first call parish. Bethlehem was a community of faith that was attentive to preaching, engaged in the study of Scriptures, and committed to discipleship and mission. Although it was a new experience for them to have a woman pastor, we all found out that God *can* use women as pastors.

Soli Deo gloria! To the glory of God alone!

Pastor Mary Ronning Gilthvedt

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November 1987 – May 1992

Pastor Mary Gilthvedt has served as a pastor for 33 years and is currently pastor at Zion Lutheran Church in Warroad, MN.