Granbury, Texas October 1, 2020

Thank you Jessica and Jean for inviting me to share with you my experiences and reflections as a female pastor having served in the Montana Synod in the rural parish called “Greater Malta Lutheran Parish” from September 13, 2003 to October 31, 2007. I was well accepted as a female pastor especially since I had the special support of my husband, also a Lutheran pastor, serving with me. Undeniably, I have always loved rural ministry having also served rural congregations in Canada prior to moving to the United States.

I truly enjoyed the rural ministry in Phillips County, especially with the people ranching in that area, raising cattle year round among the treeless hills, surveying their herds by flying homebuilt ultra-light aircraft to check on their huge herds, riding ATV’s or often on horseback. Round up time and branding was fun among the ranchers and cowboys.

While I was driving to the northernmost part of the parish I would also give a quick glance at the beautiful wild life: deer, antelope, elk, hawks, eagles as well as the herds of cattle. One afternoon we were invited by one of the wildlife managers in our Malta congregation to see the gathering of hundreds of elk and experience the bugling of the bull elk. We would watch them, mesmerized, as we could hear the clacking of the antlers and the strange powerful sound of their rutting calls.

The WELCA group was good, and strong, quilting for Lutheran World Relief and making prayer shawls for grieving widows and widowers. The men were active in helping to maintain the facilities and weekly breakfast Bible studies. The Sunset Nursing Home was an opportunity to visit, listening to seniors and sharing their lives. Sunday afternoon worship was always a highlight for them that was shared with other congregations in the community.

We experienced numerous weddings with the young men and women from the Whitewater congregation, as well as many funerals, often for people whose families had been long gone from Malta but wanted burial to be in Malta. For me, the weddings were quite entertaining since everyone was invited to the receptions for dining, drinking and dancing. It seemed to be a tradition in the area with which I was not familiar. I enjoyed the dancing and meeting with people, parishioners, or not.

So, on-the-whole, that first ministry in America was certainly good for me as I could get to know the rural part of this huge country that was adopting me on a work visa. I much enjoyed the people finding them to be much more open and direct, ready to help and easily sharing their sincere faith.

For me, there is a big shadow to this picture. Plainly explained, it is the inevitable demographic shrinking that affects the economy in rural areas, and for sure the life of the small congregations which gather mostly seniors, having lost the young adult generation and their children who have left the area for more lucrative jobs. Dodson and Loring congregations belong to that category. Dodson was a small community 18 miles from Malta with an average of 10 people in worship Sundays. Loring was 35 miles north of Malta with an average of 4.75 people in attendance, including the organist. All of these people depended on Malta for their basic needs, grocery shopping, dining, medical care, fuel. That was obviously the shadow of the parish that frustrated and saddened me so much: small congregations hanging on barely to a thread of life, choosing not to group with their neighboring Lutheran congregations, stuck worshipping their little building and content to be a dying family club.

Thanks to my husband deciding to resign the parish became Unity Lutheran Parish of Malta and Whitewater. Amen.

Thank you Jessica and Jean. I count on your forgiveness for my tardiness in sharing with you my serving in the Montana Synod and thus being able to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the ordination of women in the ELCA. Stay safe FROM COVID-19!! God bless you all!!!

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