Rev. Laurie Jungling

Bishop, Montana Synod

Service in Montana

* 2007-2008 – Interim Director of NRIT
* 2015-2019 – Intentional Interim pastor at Redeemer in Great Falls; St. Paul’s in Cut Bank; Hope in Powell WY; and Gold Hill in Butte.
* 2019-current -- Bishop of the Montana Synod

I was called to be a pastor by being told “no, you can’t be a pastor because you’re a woman.” I had walked into the Army chaplain’s office wanting to explore the possibility of becoming a chaplain after I finished Officer Candidate School, and I left his office both weeping and angry. That Southern Baptist chaplain never knew how his words affected me that day.

Nobody had ever told me I couldn’t do something simply because I was a woman and I decided there and then that I would prove him wrong. But before I went off to seminary angry, I spent two years discerning if this was truly God’s call for me or if I was doing it just to be contrary. It turned out the call was real and it took me down paths I never dreamed on that June day I started summer Greek at Luther Seminary.

When I graduated, I was probably the only person who chose Eastern North Dakota on my preference form for where I wanted to serve. But I didn’t end up there. Instead, Bishop Andrea DeGroot-Nesdahl, newly elected bishop of the South Dakota synod and the second female bishop in the ELCA, stole me away in her effort to bring more female pastors to her synod. I am so grateful she was willing to push the boundaries in that synod by insisting that a 3-point parish in NW South Dakota at least consider my paperwork and interview me.

I still remember those interviews at three different congregations in this predominantly conservative ranching area. While one congregation was concerned that I’d preach political issues such as feminism and abortion, another asked questions like, “Do you hunt and can you gut a deer? Do you fish and can you clean a fish? Can you change a tire?” The last was a good question since I’d be driving 106 miles on a Sunday over back-country roads in a time before cell phones. My answers to these questions were “I’ll preach the gospel and law as Jesus calls; No; I can learn; and Yes.” That got me in.

My most uncomfortable experience as a female pastor serving these amazing group of people was when members tried to fix me up on dates with two different men connected to the congregation. I know some of my single male colleagues have had this experience as well, but discouraging these acts of “caring for me” was hard since I had chosen to remain single, something uncommon for women even in the 1990’s.

Two of my most life-giving experiences as a pastor were the recognition by parishioners that my presence as a “woman pastor” made a positive difference in their lives. One was a mom of twin 4-year old girls who told me with pride after Sunday worship that just the day before, her daughters had been playing “Pastor Laurie” in their bedroom by baptizing their stuffed animals. I knew then that at least three women had re-envisioned what a pastor could look like just by me being their pastoral leader.

Another parishioner was a World War II vet who was not at all keen on calling a woman as the congregation’s pastor. Yet after I started, he and his wife invited me over every Saturday for a lunch of soup and sandwiches. We talked and the relationship grew as they both gave me a chance to be their pastor. A couple of years later when I was visiting him in the nearby veteran’s hospital, he said to me, “I never thought I’d have both a woman pastor and a woman doctor, and now I have both…and I love it!” Again, through my pastoral presence, change happened.

During my careers as a pastor, a doctoral student, a professor, and an interim pastor, I have never had a horrible experience because of my gender in the same way some of my colleagues have described. I am blessed to never have been attacked, harassed, shot down, or dismissed in any way that damaged me or my ministry to the point that I considered leaving this vocation. Yet the small jabs at my gender as I fulfilled my vocation throughout the past 29 years were real and, though I let most of them roll off my back, I was ever aware of the momentary hurt they could cause. Those experiences haven’t stopped completely, although I am grateful that they have waned significantly in the second decade of the 21st century as I have taught in classrooms, guided congregations through transitions and now serve as bishop.

One of the things I’ve noticed about this journey of women in pastoral leadership that saddens me is the “taking it for granted” attitude that is expressed by so many younger women who don’t recognize just how far women have come in the past 70 years and how much energy, sweat and tears it took to reach where women are now. I saw that too often in my college students even as they continued to be sexually harassed by their male counterparts.

But I am also saddened by a perspective that says because women are still not equal to men in many areas of the church and world, we shouldn’t celebrate the women who are currently serving or honor those who have come before and paved the way to make it easier for women and men in ministry today. Celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the ordination of women in the Lutheran church is not a cheerleading pat on the back for reaching the goal. Nor is it about ego-driven, self-congratulations of applause.

This Anniversary is a time of *defiant joy* that allows us to share our stories as women of this church, naming the pain that was and still is suffered while honoring the strength, courage, and determination of the many women and men who have pushed and continue to push the church to make ministry possible for more and more of those who have been too often been excluded.

This Anniversary is a time of *defiant joy* during which we can give thanks and praise to God for bringing God’s new life into this church through the ministries of women in ways beyond my imagination even 24 years ago when I began my ministry. And there are so many forums available to do this such as assemblies, videos, worship services, and compilations of memories like this one. My hope is that we all, people of all genders, can find a way to do this in as many ways as possible over the next months undaunted by Covid-19.

This Anniversary is a time of *defiant joy* in which women and so many others say “no, things are not equal yet, but we’re still here, called by God and empowered by the Holy Spirit, to proclaim and serve Christ’s gospel in and for this church and the world. Get used to it!”

I am honored to have been able to serve God and Christ’s Church in so many different ways over the past years – as preacher, teacher, pastoral counselor, transition pastor, and change-maker in my own small ways. And I am honored now to serve as bishop of the Montana Synod, doing my best in the Spirit’s power to help lead the Church further into the new life God is calling us to seek in this time and place.

May God bless, strengthen and inspire those of all genders who are serving in ministry today!