Pastor Amanda Liggett:

I struggle to write an essay about being a woman pastor in Montana, because the truth be told I don’t think about it in those terms very often. In the time and place where I grew up, no one ever told me I couldn’t do or be anything. When my pastor asked me at the age of 12 if I would be a pastor myself someday, it never crossed my mind that I had never seen a woman pastor. Of course I could, if I wanted to.

Much of this is attributable to the people in my community – a roughly 2500-square-mile county of cattle ranches and oil fields in northwest South Dakota. The women I knew had cow dung on their boots and lace on their shirts. They were ladies in every sense of the word, but they were also cowgirls whose physical work was just as hard as that of the men. One of my heroes in life is my great-aunt Toni, who left home as a teenager and became a barn-stormer and wing walker. It is difficult in such an environment to tell a little girl that anything is out of reach.

This is different than many of the stories colleagues have shared over the years; of discouragement, criticism, threatening behavior and questions both silly and insulting. In light of this, I almost hesitate to say it, lest it come across as dissent. Certainly, I have had the occasional insensitive utterance about my profession, but they are rare and inconsequential. To do this work in this place and not carry the wounds so many have suffered will, I hope, be normal before long.

This was brought home to me when Rev. Dr. Laurie Jungling was installed as bishop of the Montana Synod. There was a moment when I stood surrounded by Bishop Jessica Crist, Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton, Interim Bishop Andrea Degroot Nesdahl, and then Bishop-Elect Laurie Jungling. It struck me that at the conclusion of her first term as bishop, I will have had a woman bishop at the synod level for thirty years (all represented in that group). In fact, I have no idea what it is like to have a man as my bishop, except on the churchwide level.

I offer this moment gently, realizing that this is not everyone’s experience. It may, in fact, be completely unique in the ELCA. Like so many, I have gratitude to those whose road was more difficult, who faced more than their share of challenges, and who suffered for the sake of others. May this perspective be encouraging to them and to those of us who are walking the trail they blazed.