

Thoughts from the Women's Ordination Anniversary Planning Meeting

The Rev. Meredith E. Harber
Christ Lutheran Church, Soldotna



“When I was in school, I told my guidance counselor that I wanted to be a pastor. He told me I simply couldn’t, because Lutherans didn’t allow women to be pastors.”

This story, along with others in this vein, were shared around the table at the ELCA Churchwide Office in Chicago on August 29th, 2018. Twelve women gathered in a conference room in the office building that houses many of our ELCA program staff for things like World Hunger, Poverty and Justice Ministries, Congregational Renewal and so forth. We came from across the United States to begin planning the 50th Anniversary of (white) Women’s Ordination in the ELCA and the 40th Anniversary of Women of Color in 2020.

Before we even introduced ourselves, Bishop Jessica Crist of the Montana Synod and the convener of this team asked for us to raise our hands to show in which decade we were ordained. After watching the hands go up, I realized that I was the youngest person at the table and the most recently ordained in 2014. We began introductions and I could feel the chills running through my

body as these powerful leaders—who happened to be women—began to tell their stories. They shared about how they felt called and yet were told they weren’t, whether by family members or guidance counselors or strangers. Then, they’d share their credentials or accomplishments, ranging from local to global work with congregations, synods, the national church and international partners. They worked in small, rural congregations and massive ones too. They are professors and advocates, bridge-builders and prophets.

As each woman spoke, the hair on my arms tingled higher and higher as my body felt the Holy Spirit blowing through the room. *How am I allowed at this table?* I thought. *Who am I?* When it came to my turn to introduce myself, I said, “Good morning. My name is Meredith and I serve as the pastor to Christ Lutheran Church in Soldotna, Alaska,” where there’s always the excited breath that an Alaskan is at the table, “and I’m just so honored to be here with you powerful women.” And then I began to cry. Not a cute, dainty, delicate cry, but a snotty, wet cry as I rambled through words of affirmation and excitement for the work that each one of them has done. And I rambled about how I felt so thankful for being able to stand on the shoulders of these giants, these women who fought against a closed door by people to God’s calling in the world. And as I slobbered and felt snot dripping from my face, my dear colleague to the right dug a crumpled paper napkin out of her purse to assist in my foolery.

I felt so silly, crying—ugly-crying—in front of these women. *We are here to celebrate women's ordination and I'm a hot mess right now!* But then I finally cleared some of the river out of my eyes and realized that there were many more tears around the table. Bishop Elizabeth Eaton—the Presiding Bishop of the ELCA and the first to be elected as a woman—looked at me and said, “You are powerful too. We need you here.”

After we dried our tears and took a deep breath, we settled in for a day of work that felt like an absolute dream. We named the joys of ministry and the sorrows. We talked about the gifts that women bring to the ministry, but seemed to have a parallel conversation about how many times we have been emotionally and physically violated as leaders in the church. How sad it is that a conversation around our calling to ministry has to be partnered with one of being harmed?

We mulled over ideas for a theme, for songs and scripture that resonated with us and for what we needed to produce for the entire ELCA to celebrate this. One of the best comments made was by one person who said, “Perhaps instead of calling it an anniversary for women, we should call it ‘Celebrating the Anniversary of the Church’s Decision to Reform.’” This is most certainly true. It wasn’t the woman who said she wasn’t allowed to be a pastor in high school; it was the Church.

The theme for this national church initiative is “We are church: We are called.” After thinking and debating, we settled on this theme, because so often we find ourselves defending this calling. It’s simple. If I could do anything else in the world I would, but I’m called to be a pastor in this church, in this time, with you, dear people of God. We’ll focus on three sub-themes: Proclaiming, Reforming and Celebrating.

Our meeting was far too brief, because I could have stayed in my chair all day and all week, just absorbing the wisdom and power from these God-driven people of faith. Instead, we parted ways and agreed to work on our projects from afar. I’ll be working with The Rev. Joann Conroy (President of the American Indian and Alaska Native Lutheran Association), Linda Norman (former treasurer of the ELCA) and Dr. Sarah Anderson-Rajarigam (pastor in PA and one of six daughters who are theologically trained, despite her family’s traditional Indian values suggesting that this education was for boys). Our project will be to write a worship service that will hopefully be used at the 2019 Churchwide Assembly, but then shared with all the congregations in the ELCA to hold their own celebration worship of women’s ordination. Additionally, there will be a Bible study, a study guide, stories of the “firsts” in the *Lutheran* and *Gather* and additional resources as possible.

I could say so much more about this experience, but instead, I hope that you take the time to find out who the “firsts” are in our synod and our congregations. Who are the “firsts” in your neighborhoods? See, women’s ordination isn’t just about the congregations, but it’s about expanding the possibilities for all people, in all professions. Please keep watch for future resources and begin to think about how you can celebrate these important events in your communities.