

Pastor Patty's Ponderings: 30th Ordination Anniversary

Occasionally on Fridays, angels bring coffee and treats to the office for morning coffee break. They were looking over my biblical storytelling scarves and asked about this quilted purple stole I have hanging on my book shelf. Linda Goertz from Portland Mennonite Church made it for my ordination in 1992. I will wear it to tell my story. It is beautiful with Lydia's purple and flames of the Holy Spirit and I never wear it because we Mennonite ministers don't wear stoles like our high church colleagues because we don't like to set ourselves apart. In fact, I wasn't sure I even wanted to be ordained in 1992. I didn't feel like I wanted any special treatment or elevated status that ordination seemed to confer. But the first woman to be ordained in the Pacific Northwest Conference, Jeannie Hershey reminded me of all the scrutiny she had to go through with bible studies about women in ministry and interviews with all male conference leaders. Her ordination was hard won and she wanted me not to take it for granted.

My journey to ministry came from my upbringing in a small Mennonite church in northern Alberta. It was a church plant from the Northwest Conference and drew a number of young families, my parents included. We all were at least 8 hours away from extended family and so became extended family for each other, celebrating birthdays and holidays together. It was that little church that made me teach Vacation Bible School at age 15 and from there, Sunday school. I had always had a sense of God's presence with me - particularly in nature and after a specific invitation to follow Jesus at camp, I chose to be baptized at age 15. They gave me this Bible with the following words...but they would have never approved of the ordination of women.

I went to Hesston College, Kansas after graduation because I wanted to study more Bible and God-stuff. In my Intro to Bible class, Duane Yoder told me I should consider ministry. I told him women weren't allowed and he said, that's why we're going to study the bible more deeply about God's inclusion of women. From there I went to Canadian Mennonite Bible College in Winnipeg and onto the University of Alberta. I worked for Holyrood Mennonite Church one summer and then went into Voluntary Service at Western Mennonite High School in Salem, Oregon where I got hooked up with youth ministry at Portland Mennonite Church which led me to the question of ordination.

I was taking Clinical Pastoral Education at Emmanuel Hospital in Portland where fellow students were also jumping through big hoops in their denomination to become ordained and credentialed to serve as chaplains and ministers and they couldn't figure out why I wouldn't do it when I didn't really have to do anything to get it and I hadn't even been to seminary yet. So I became the second woman to be ordained in the Pacific Northwest Conference 30 years ago. As part of my ordination, a Pentecostal elder Dan Newcomer stood up and with hands raised gave me a blessing that has stuck with me for 30 years. Another elder said he wasn't sure about women ministers but I was O.K. It was an occasion for Portland Mennonite Church to also come together in an empowering ritual for them. It wasn't just about me that day. I'm looking forward to returning to Portland Mennonite this November for their 100th anniversary.

I recently found a letter I wrote to my grandmother about ministry: March 3, 1994, Dear Grandmalt is just one month until you come visit me in Oregon. I just want to report that the crocuses and daffodils are in blooms and awaiting your arrival. You can leave the snow and cold of Alberta at home. I've been working hard at church but I take time for fun too - like going to the beach and this weekend the youth group is going skiing. It is always a relief when I don't have to preach. I enjoy preaching and work hard at it but it is a very vulnerable position to be in and I find it draining. I have Mondays off and I usually sleep and sleep. I am thinking a lot about my move to seminary in Indiana this fall. I am mentally preparing myself for leaving here. It makes me sad but it wouldn't matter when I left here - it would always be difficult. I really do feel like it's the right time to go to seminary. I have some money and some experience and it would be harder to do if I were married and had kids. I think it will be fun to meet new people and be closer to my friends in Ontario. I have to trust God's leading and trust that God will take care of me in all circumstances.

LGBTQ inclusion and church membership was following hard on the heels of the ordination of women. My uncle said, "It's a slippery slope. Once you ordain women, next it will be the gays." It became obvious to me that biblical work that had led to my ordination also had to be done with gay membership which would be even more divisive than women in ministry. I began reading everything I could to understand that being gay wasn't a choice. A good friend at seminary came out and that experience spoke louder to me than all my studying on the topic.

After seminary, Patrick and I went to Faith Mennonite Church in Minneapolis that had just split over gay membership, which had also included the previous pastoral couple. We were very young and green to be walking into that Mennonite Disaster Service. Faith was dually affiliated with North District Conference (General Conference) and Iowa-Nebraska Conference (Old Mennonites). Northern District had a hands-off policy while Iowa-Nebraska was still quite authoritarian and they met yearly to vote Faith out of the conference. It was a stressful and dramatic time. We gave testimony after testimony of how our gay members contributed to our congregation and how God was working through all of us. We barely passed expulsion as a congregation and Patrick and I were sternly warned not to marry gays or our ordinations would be revoked. It was all very heavy-handed and sad but we survived and grew closer as a congregation under the pressure. We loved living and working in Minneapolis. Like the congregation where I grew up, none of us had relatives in the church so we became family to each other. That still shapes what I hope for in church.

Like families in conflict, I had a conflict at church that ground me down and led me to leave ministry for a while. We moved to Saskatoon for Patrick's job at Nutana Park but I took a year off to write and discern. The Mennonite Nursing Home in Rosthern was looking for a chaplain. Erna Funk was on the board then and helped get me the job. I'll always owe her for that and I had a wonderful 5 and 1/2 years there and met Lynette Janzen who helped me get the job at Osler and I'll always owe her for that!

It's been an amazing 8 year run here with 6 weddings and 20 funerals and umpteen sermons and services and parties and visits. These past 30 years, I reflect back on all the amazing opportunities I've had to enter people's lives at important junctures of marriage, death, birth and baptism. I've worked in some amazing places. I've made mistakes in ministry - often putting tasks before people, judging people. But what a journey it's been and I'm deeply thankful for God's clear hand in leading and sometimes pushing. I'm thankful to have had a career of meaningful, interesting, diverse work and wanting to go to work every day.