

Laurie Jungling: New Bishop of the Montana Synod

Bishop Laurie Jungling has been continually surprised by God's plan for her life. Like many people, it was not the plan that she expected.

Jungling was born and raised in Great Falls, MT and baptized and confirmed in the Lutheran church. "The biggest influence in my faith life at an early age was Sharon Weaver's choir school," Jungling said. "It was a big deal back then. We would put on performances, sing regularly and put on plays."

Although she liked choir school and attended church with her family, Jungling had no thoughts of going into ordained ministry when she left home. She attended Montana State University in Bozeman, starting out as a computer science major but quickly switching to social and criminal justice. "I thought I wanted to be a spy," she said.

After college, Jungling joined the military, hoping to go into military intelligence. She finished basic training and most of OCS before becoming injured. "This was at the time the Berlin Wall fell and they were going to cut back on troops," Jungling said. The cutbacks provided the opportunity to leave the military so Laurie did, but not with a sense of disappointment. Instead, she was filled with questions.

During her stint in the military, Jungling attended a bible study and went to chapel regularly and she'd begun feeling a sense of call to be a pastor. She couldn't explain the feeling and decided to talk to the chaplain about this perceived sense of call. The chaplain, however, told her she couldn't become a pastor and when she asked why not, he said it was because she was a woman.

"I left angry because no one had ever told me I couldn't do something because I was a woman," Jungling said. Because of her emotion, Jungling decided she wouldn't immediately enroll in seminary after leaving the military. She wanted to give herself some time to make sure she was going because she really felt a call and not because someone had told her she couldn't.

At this point in her life, facing a difficult decision, Jungling did what people have been doing for centuries. She went into the wilderness to think. In her case, however, the wilderness was Rolla, ND, fifteen miles from the Canadian border. And she needed to support herself so she pumped gas, wearing a full jumpsuit in the bitter cold as she pumped gas and checked oil through two North Dakota winters.

The time in Rolla allowed Laurie to discern what her feeling of call might mean. She also got involved with a local Presbyterian church and helped with the youth group and she spent time with family in the area. Finally, Jungling decided she had enough of pumping gas and she had a conversation with God.

"I said, 'God, I'll do this seminary thing.'" She decided to just try summer Greek, which is an intensive class fitting three sections of Greek into one summer. "And if I pass," she said, "I'll go to seminary and if I don't, I'll do something else."

As it turned out, Jungling loved summer Greek and her years at seminary. Following an internship in Crosby, ND, she graduated and received a call to Buffalo Lutheran Parish in South Dakota. "It was centered in Buffalo but had three congregations yoked together," Jungling said. "It was a great experience with amazing people who taught me a lot about what it is to be a pastor and what it is to be a human being."

Jungling said she loved the people and appreciated the rugged country around Buffalo but felt a push to continue her education. So, exactly three years after moving to South Dakota, she returned to Luther Seminary for a M.Th. in Systematic Theology and then decided to pursue a Ph.D. in Ethics and Social Theory with allied field in Systematic Theology.

"I went to the Graduate Theological Union through PLTS in Berkeley, California. Spent four years in Berkeley working on my Ph. D., then moved back to Great Falls to finish my dissertation," she said. In 2007 she finished her dissertation and began looking for a teaching position. During this time, she also served as interim director for NRIT by request of newly elected Bishop, Jessica Crist.

Jungling found a teaching position at Augustana University in Sioux Falls, SD and stayed for six years, teaching religion and ethics. "I loved teaching, loved teaching that age of student. Just loved every minute in the classroom," she said. However, due to financial considerations, Jungling's position was cut before she was tenured. She again found herself looking for teaching jobs until Jessica Crist called and asked if Jungling would consider coming back to Montana and serving as an interim pastor.

Laurie accepted the invitation and moved back to Great Falls to be an interim pastor at Redeemer Lutheran. She became trained in intentional interim ministry and, after Redeemer, served a year and a half at St. Paul's Lutheran in Cut Bank, six months at Hope Lutheran in Powell, WY and the last year in Butte at Gold Hill Lutheran.

Although Jungling's life has not followed an expected path, she's realized that it has all prepared her for this next role. Her years as an intentional interim minister have especially prepared her to be a bishop because interim ministry showed her four different congregations with different styles of ministry, different ways of doing church and different issues churches can face. "Without those experiences I wouldn't have left my name in [during the election of Bishop] and would not have been able to share my faith and vision," she said, adding that she has thanked each one of those churches for the experience.

Jungling feels as though she found a gift in interim ministry and she sees the role of the bishop in this place and time as similar to that of a transition pastor. "Because things are changing, life

is changing in the church and what will that look like for the Montana synod and the ELCA?" she said.

Jungling pushes back against the feeling that the church is dying. "I have seen life and I have seen God working and seen the power of the Spirit working in the churches I've been a part of. I see my role as a bishop who empowers and encourages congregations to discover and rediscover their faith in new ways. I'm dreaming about a church that is following the Holy Spirit and experiencing the life and the joy and power of God working on their lives and wanting to share that with others through both words and actions."

Jungling said that when her position was cut at Augustana, she threw her hands up and said to God, "Okay, wherever you need me to go."

It was hard to lose a job that she loved and she was forced to give up control and live in faith.

"It's been very freeing to live within that faith and within the grace of God, rather than constantly struggling against it to seek my own wishes," she said. And the same thing goes for her new role as Bishop. "You participate in what God is doing rather than fight against it. The Spirit is already working, live into it and take risks. Live in risky faithfulness."

Bishop Jungling said this is the type of vitality we need in the church right now. "It's responsibly risky faith, being responsive to Christ. That means trying and failing. That means exploring and trying new things and seeing what's possible."

Jungling is excited to participate in this responsibly risky faith with the people of the Montana Synod and the ELCA, working to support and empower pastoral leaders in the skills and the gifts of leadership and working with her staff to help move the synod forward.

Bishop Jungling enjoys hiking in Glacier Park and Yellowstone, likes to bike and walk and read novels in her free time.