

God's Gifting: Celebrating the 25th Year of Ordaining Women as Pastors in the LCMS

By Carol Schmidt

[Carol Schmidt is a member of Immanuel Lutheran Church in Clifton, Texas. She is a graduate of Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, Texas (B.S., 1982) and Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Austin, Texas (M. Div., 2009).]

The following is a sermon by LCMS pastor, Stephanie Zimmerman. She is perhaps your great-granddaughter, or a young woman who is presently studying at one of the Concordias. She is an ordained LCMS pastor who is preaching on some future Pentecost Sunday. And this is one of many such sermons being preached that day, as the whole denomination is celebrating the 25th anniversary of the ordination of women in the LCMS. Consider how we celebrate the Reformation and you will have an idea of the feel that day will have.

The text is Acts 2:1-21. The title of her sermon is "As the Spirit Gave Them Ability" with a subtitle that notes the celebration of twenty-five years of ordaining women in the LCMS. Stephanie is not the ordinand but one of many LCMS pastors who are women.

As the Spirit Gave Them Ability: Celebrating the 25th Year of Ordaining Women as Pastors in the LCMS
by Pr. Stephanie Zimmerman

Amazed, astounded, astonished. Troubled, stirred up, perplexed. Confused, marveling, wondering, surprised. These words describe some of the ways people feel when hearing gospel words from unexpected sources. Following the ascension of Jesus Christ, women and men prayed together and waited for the Holy Spirit, as Jesus had instructed. And out of the quiet waiting burst a sudden sound that filled the entire house. "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability." Out of the one sound came many voices, and hearing the sound, a crowd gathered.

Twenty-five years ago as Pentecost and the summer convention neared, across the country Missouri Synod Lutherans, women and men together, prayed and were waiting for a sound from heaven. It seemed so long they had been waiting, through the studies and discussions. Now they waited for a vote to begin ordaining women. But as they prayed and waited that spring and early summer, remembrance brought tears of sadness over the decades of brokenness, along with tears of gratitude for hope reaching out of that history.

In the early decades of this 21st Century, the LCMS was at a low point in its brief history. At a time of dramatic social change and turmoil worldwide, Missouri Synod leaders used the fears of people to manipulate and dominate through their own particular and official interpretation of scripture. Their primary targets at that time were women and their main objective was to keep them out of the pastoral office. But the motivating fear in their ferocity against and denial of women pastors was their fear of homosexuality. Silent women were the only barrier left between fearful people and having to seriously

consider love between two persons of the same sex.

Fear created a type of hell within the denomination and we came to be known as the denomination of "no." It was not until 1994 that the CTCR published a report denouncing racism. With that barrier removed, women were next on the edge of the "slippery slope" of change.

Out of the one sound came many voices, and hearing the sound, a crowd gathered. In Acts we are told that the people were bewildered, because what they were seeing and hearing didn't make sense to them. Out of the many voices of women and men, each person was hearing the gospel message in a way, in a language, she or he could understand. Out of the many voices, each person heard "them speaking about God's deeds of power." Out of the Spirit-given ability of each voice, male and female, they were hearing about God.

Luke records that all were "amazed and perplexed," but out of this surprise came two responses to the gospel, as was frequently the case also when God's deeds of power were demonstrated in Jesus. The first was a humble response in the form of a question: "What does this mean?" The second response was the prideful mocking and sneering that Jesus often encountered. Pride led some of the people to dismiss the mighty deeds of God.

Many women pastors had been raised in the Missouri Synod, but they had to move to other denominations to be ordained. Failure of the LCMS to recognize that the mighty deeds of God continue on in the body of Christ, in each member as the Spirit gives ability, led to derogatory remarks and statements directed at these women of God and all women pastors.

The word "priestitute" was used to call women pastors whores and prostitutes. In a book published as late as 2011, a man wrote that "Being female is not sinful. However, a female who enters into the office of the Holy Ministry is in a state of sin." [1] It's difficult for us to fathom today the attitudes of young men sent out from our seminaries back then toward women who were their peers in ministry.

In the denomination of "no," the only question mark allowed followed the words, "Women Pastors." While women clearly had Spirit-given ability for preaching and ordained ministry, because of disbelief, the Missouri Synod lacked the humility to ask the question, "What does this mean?" Rather than humbly consider questions other Lutheran church bodies were asking, the LCMS practiced domination through interpretation and threatened those other Lutherans with being cut off from fellowship and support if they ordained women.

Using words of the prophet Joel, Peter explained what was going on to the people who failed to believe. In the days ahead, in these last days, your sons and your daughters will prophesy. I (God) will pour out my Spirit on my servants, and they will prophesy. God's gifting - God's work - in and through God's people. What was happening in Acts, the mighty Yes of God, had been foretold long before. The righteousness of God in the one man Jesus Christ was now being poured out on all of God's people. And the voices of God's people, women and men, were freed and heard, as the Spirit gave them ability. For those who believed, gone were the archaic, dehumanizing laws designed to control female flesh, which could only be controlled through enforced silence.

Change began in the LCMS as the people began to understand the many theological hoops and twisting of scripture the Missouri Synod had to go through to exclude words of God spoken through women. While the throats of women were used to parrot the words of men, their Spirit-given words were not wanted. During that same time, LCMS daughters banished because of their God-given voices and vocational paths began to be remembered, and the tremendous loss of female leadership from the LCMS was acknowledged and mourned.

People began again to read scripture, paying particular attention to the mighty deeds of God in Jesus Christ. They began to wonder why, two millennia after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the church continued to operate in a state of disbelief, as if no redemptive act had occurred and we were still waiting for a savior. How had the one Word of God heard through many Spirit-enabled voices fallen silent in the Missouri Synod? What was attempting to silence God?

People denied voice are enslaved by human captors and in the LCMS, women denied voice were enslaved by men. Through faulty interpretation, women were held captive by men, included among God's people only as property of men. Claiming infallible interpretation of God's Word is the pinnacle of hubris. A claim of infallible interpretation is a claim to be God. This was the way an elite group in the Missouri Synod maintained power and dominated others, by silencing all the other voices through whom God speaks.

The hearts and minds of Missouri Synod Lutherans began to change when they first began hearing the sound from heaven through voices of women and Lutherans abroad who spoke about God's deeds of power. The Spirit's gifting of speech to these diverse people left many in Missouri amazed, perplexed, wondering, and surprised. Some were troubled and confused, while others simply praised God.

We're grateful that some of our grandmothers and grandfathers who lived through that wondrous and trying time are with us today. And we're grateful for the many others who are eternally present among the blessed saints.

It's good to remember our history and learn from it. The ordination of women in the Missouri Synod marked a return to humility - a return to wonder and awe in the mighty deeds of God - a return to asking out of amazement, "What does this mean?" It marked a return to love and a return to God.

And now we go out from this place, equipped not only with voices to speak but also ears to listen for the one Word flowing out of the speech of others, as the Spirit has given them ability.

[1] Robert C. Baker, ed., *Natural Law: A Lutheran Reappraisal* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2011), 264.