

## From the pastor's pen...

*"Do not pursue pastoral ministry if you do not have a sense of humor and cannot laugh at yourself." —Elsie Epp*

Pastoral ministry is a high calling — a multi-faceted role that demands energy, creativity and wisdom to lead the church in prophetic, priestly and shepherding ways. From hospital visitation to sermon preparation, administrative detail to envisioning direction, the life of a pastor is ever changing and never dull. Self expectations coupled with congregational care can make pastoral leadership an all-consuming and heavy load.

Given this reality, it is important to cultivate the ability to laugh — at one's self and the situations in which we find ourselves at times. Laughter is a gift that helps one out of a tight spot; that dissipates an awkward predicament; that changes perspective. Women in ministry often find themselves in unusual situations. As one pastor wrote:

*"There is the time my dress caught on fire during a children's story. The time I chased a goat around the church during a Christmas Eve service, and the time I was serving communion when a confused older woman washed her hands in the cup. The ability to laugh has saved me!" —Mag Richer Smith*

Whether it is related to their identity as pastors or their role as mothers, women in ministry do well if they can see the humor in a difficult encounter.

The following stories are a sampling of situations in ministry—actual happenings for women pastors across Canada and the United States. The stories represent women at all stages of life and ministry, solo pastors, associates, co-pastors and chaplains. Many of the stories are lighter and will bring a smile. Other stories are sobering, reminders of the ongoing challenges in ministry. The common thread underlying all these story tellers is their commitment to God's call to leadership and service. Enjoy these windows into pastoral ministry. —*Louise Wideman*

### Identity Stories

#### A) "You're a pastor?"

1) "I was on my way to visit someone at the hospital and drove up to the parking garage with my little old Toyota Tercel with an infant seat in the back. I stopped to get a free clergy parking pass from the attendant, a middle-aged woman. She took one look at me and my car and exclaimed in a strong southern drawl, 'You ain't no preacher!' I took out my credential card and showed it to her. She handed over the pass. I thanked her and silently thanked our conference minister's office for sending out that credential card. It saved me a couple of dollars at the parking garage that day." — *Heidi Regier Kreider*

2) "My husband and I live in the parsonage next to the church. Many times when a stranger comes to the house or church, they ask me if they can speak to the pastor. I say, 'Yes, you already are.'" — *Aldine Musser*

3) "It was my turn to help serve and clean up the church fellowship meal. Two Tanzanian visitors came seeking the pastor. Adorned with an apron, I informed them that I was the pastor. They looked at me for a long time and then said, 'It is kind of like Jesus. He served others and washed their feet.'"—*Cynthia Lapp*

4) "A group was renting the church building. I was cleaning the kitchen when the first man arrived. He said, 'Secretaries are given all kinds of jobs aren't they?' Others were behind him and a conversation led to discovering I was one of the pastors. He reached out his hand to shake mine." —*Aldine Musser*

5) "A few years into my ministry, a new conference minister was named for our conference. He was very vocal in his support for women in ministry, but he didn't have a lot of experience working with women in pastoral ministry. To introduce himself to the congregations in our area, he did a tour meeting with pastors and lay persons from each congregation. He met with nearly a dozen members of my congregation and me for breakfast at a nearby restaurant. Toward the end of the conversation, I left the table to use the restroom. After the meeting, several members of the congregation commented that while I was out, he had asked them what it was like having a 'girl pastor.' From then on, the entire congregation referred to him as our 'boy conference minister.'" —*Kathy Goering Reid*

6) "As a young, inexperienced pastor, I learned much about building maintenance concerns in my first few years. When the ancient boiler in our church building was on the blink, I met the service/repair person at the door and guided him downstairs to the boiler room. I admitted that I didn't really know what was wrong; but I was assured that he had spoken with our building finance committee chairperson.

"After his inspection of the boiler's flaws, he placed a cell phone call to the heating company while I was standing beside him. Into the phone he said, 'Well, I don't know about the pastor, but I'm standing here with the secretary and she doesn't seem to know anything!' I chuckled to myself that I truly didn't understand the situation, though I had one more fact than he. After ending his call, he asked whether he could get a signature from the pastor. I was pleased to reply, 'I'm the pastor of this church.' He didn't make eye contact as I signed." —*Jennifer Davis Sensenig*

#### B) "The Pastor's Wife"

1) "Once when my husband and I were co-pastoring in a congregation, my husband was asked to offer the blessing for the meal because he was 'the pastor'. The comment, however, was accompanied with a wink directed at me. It came from a male church member who had initially been opposed to women in ministry. The incident felt like a humorous, but significant, gesture of acceptance." —*Julie Bender*

2) "A visiting speaker at a church anniversary celebration was commenting on the current pastor and his wife. (This is one of the comments that really gets my goat!) I was relaying this complaint to a group of church folks over lunch. One of the men found it very amusing. Ever since, he has greeted me with 'Oh look, here comes the pastor's wife!' He has taken the sting out of it for me. He often adds, 'And here is the pastor's husband.'" —*Claire Ewert Fisher*

3) "One morning when I was preaching at my field work church while in seminary, the parents of church members visited. The father was a Mennonite seminary professor and his wife was a strong, gifted woman who had made a name for herself in her own right.

“That afternoon, my husband stopped by the church member’s home to drop off something for them. He was met at the door by the visiting mother, who exclaimed when she saw him, ‘Oh, you’re the preacher’s wife!’ My husband didn’t bother to correct her and in the conversation she didn’t correct herself.” —*Kathleen Weaver Kurtz*

**C) Out of the mouths of babes ....**

1) “It happened on the day of my ordination 12 years following the ordination of my husband. After the service of celebration and affirmation, we were returning home with our three children, ages 6, 10, and 12. I believe it was the middle one who curiously asked, ‘Dad, have you ever been coordinated?’ ” —*Elsie Epp*

2) “A little girl, about four years old, who was growing up in the first church I pastored was eager to tell me about her two-week absence during the summer. She had visited her cousins and attended their home church. Aware of the unusual and fascinating news she was about to share, she announced, ‘And they have a *man* for a pastor!’ ” —*Jennifer Davis Sensenig*

3) “One morning teaching a middler’s Sunday school class on the retrieval of the ark of the covenant and David’s dance before the Lord, I spontaneously decided to teach a simple dance to one of the Taize songs we were going to sing later in worship that morning. The children loved the dance and I invited them to share it with the congregation in worship. Not having informed their parents, some of the children had momentary trouble getting permission to leave the pew during this song and join me up front. The mother of a fourth-grade girl reported to me that they were working on obedience in their home and she had been initially upset when her daughter had slipped out of the pew and resisted her mother’s request to sit back down. Later, the mother and daughter talked about the situation. The mother asked, ‘If I tell you to do one thing and the pastor tells you to do something else, who will you obey?’ Without delay, the daughter replied, ‘I would have to obey the pastor.’ The mother, quite taken aback, promptly remarked, ‘Well I think the pastor would want you to obey me.’ The daughter was apparently unconvinced.” —*Jennifer Davis Sensenig*

4) “For six years, we had only female pastors. A mother of an elementary aged child told me that her child had spent the night with a friend and gone to church with them. When the child came home, the child said, ‘Mom, did you know ministers could be men?’ ” —*Debbie Schmidt*

5) “One Christmas season, a young boy about nine went with his parents to visit his grandparents to another state. The next Sunday after the visit he came to me in seriousness and said, ‘I have to tell you something. My grandma has a man for a preacher!’ His look of puzzlement and concern was sheer delight to me.” —*Dorothy Nickel Friesen*

6) “I met a congregational family at the local grocery store. The 3 ½ year old in the cart pointed at me and said, ‘You go to my church!’ ” —*Dorothy Nickel Friesen*

**D) All in the family**

1) “When I first told my mom and dad that I was going to seminary, my mother burst out laughing and said, ‘You mean you are going to preach!’”

“I said, ‘Yes, mom, I suppose I will preach.’ My dad’s comment then was, ‘Well, how will you be submissive to your husband?’ It was difficult for my parents to think of their daughter as a preacher.

“Since that time, the large Mennonite church where my parents attend hired a woman associate pastor. My parents have come to really enjoy her. When my parents attended my ordination, my dad said that it was one of the happiest days of his life. I have also learned that, when you work with your husband as pastor, there are things to which you do have to submit to each other. So I have learned about submitting to my husband also.” —*Naomi Engle*

2) “‘Do you really know how to bury someone?’ was the question by out-of-town relatives when they discovered I was to officiate at the funeral. I said something like, ‘I’ve officiated at many funerals and I think I’ll be just fine here today.’” —*Dorothy Nickel Friesen*

3) “I told my elderly uncle that I was going to become a minister. He responded by saying emphatically, ‘Women can’t be ministers!’ I reminded him that his own congregation had a husband/wife team ministry. ‘Don’t you think that Janet does a good job when she preaches?’

“‘Of course she does a good job! That’s the problem! She’s so good, she puts her husband to shame every time she preaches because she’s way better than him!’” —*permission granted*

#### E) Never too old ...

1) “Lizzie, an 80 year-old woman from another state, was losing her sight and no longer able to live on her own. She came to live with her son, a member of our church. Lizzie was born Amish but had left this tradition some years earlier.

“I started to visit Lizzie regularly because her son saw her struggling with the loss of her eyesight and other health problems. It was a joy to visit Lizzie—a spunky woman who also gave good spiritual insight. Lizzie came from a more traditional belief that only men were pastors and had not looked at women pastors in a positive light. She later told her son, ‘I never thought I would like having a woman pastor but I do. She is easy to talk to.’ Being a widow, she realized that there were certain things that she would have felt uncomfortable talking about with a male pastor. Later, when her son asked her what we talked about, she would say, ‘Oh women things’ and leave it at that.” —*Naomi Engle*

2) “In one congregation I served, I had an older man who felt women should not be any closer to the front of the church than the front pew, unless they were in the choir or playing the organ. Yet he was kind to me and my family and related to me with unusual openness for someone with such strong feelings against women in ministry.

“At my farewell, he rose to speak. His words were an apology of sorts and an affirmation of my ministry. He said that he felt God had called me to pastoral ministry and that I was a good pastor who could be in the pulpit—even though it was up front!” —*Rosie Epp*

3) “Within my first few months of pastoring, I went to the funeral home during visiting hours of the deceased brother of an elderly woman in the congregation. I expected to talk with her briefly and leave, but she insisted on taking me around to meet each one of her numerous siblings. Each time, I was introduced – ‘This is my pastor.’ I was honored and somewhat amused at her gift, realizing that she was helping to reinforce my still shaky identity as a pastor.

“Several years later, I mentioned this incident to her and thanked her for what she had done. ‘Oh I didn’t do that for you,’ she said. ‘I wanted all my brothers and sisters to know that my pastor is a woman!’ She went on to say, ‘My brother still argues with me about that. Just last week I wrote him a letter about it again. And I’d like to know what you think about what I said. I told him that I understand that there is a shortage of pastors in the church. And I asked him if there is a shortage of pastors, does he think that God would rather have women serve who have the gifts for pastoral ministry or that we just not have pastors in our churches?’ (Well ....?)” —*permission granted*

**F) Where are the men?**

1) “Approximately a year into my pastorate at Faith Mennonite Church, I entered the worship space to begin the Sunday evening service. On my way, I greeted a visiting couple. I recognized the woman who had come to me a few weeks prior to learn more about our congregation. After worship, we talked again and this time they shared a concern they had after reading the bulletin. ‘Are men allowed to be in leadership here?’ she wondered. The man looked on with curiosity. They had seen mostly female names in our bulletin in the listing of pastors, elders, and council members. We chuckled. I assured them that men were very active in the congregation, but we also recognized that our congregation was very different, nearly opposite of many there the leadership was mostly or all men. The couple chose not to return; however, they are involved in a church where there is a solo woman pastor.” —*Teresa Dutchersmith*

2) “As a chaplain, I went to visit a young woman and her husband just after they gave birth to their first child. I introduced myself as a chaplain and offered a blessing for their baby. Before I left the room, I asked if there was anything I could do for them. The young man looked right at me and asked if I would ask the chaplain to visit. After a long pause, I restated that I was a chaplain – how could I help? Long pause. I then rescued him and said, ‘Would you like me to send a male chaplain to visit you?’ He said, ‘Yes.’

“I went and found this young man and his wife a male chaplain. As manager of the Center for Spiritual Care, I sent a REAL chaplain to visit this couple.” —*Myra Raab*

**G) Welcome to my church – I think**

“My congregation is mostly made up of urban professionals and is clearly the most liberal Mennonite congregation in our state and the entire conference. We are sometimes painfully conscious of how this makes us stick out and even suspect among the more rural, agricultural congregations elsewhere around the state. Early in my time here, a Mennonite organization which, like Mennonite Central Committee has Mennonite groups beyond Mennonite Church USA involved, asked to have their annual meeting in our church. I said sure, and the organizer asked if I’d also be willing to have a short meditation to kick off the event. Sure, I said again, knowing that there would be a sizeable contingent from non-conference groups and glad to have the opportunity to welcome them to our church.

“I spent a lot of time preparing for that 10 minute meditation, really wanting to make it good – partly, I admit, due to the fact that some of these folks may never have heard a woman do anything like this and I wanted to broaden their constellation of women’s gifts! In addition, I really wanted to establish meaningful contact with people from groups who had left conference very painfully years ago.

“When the evening came, I had a copy of the agenda. The sanctuary filled, mostly men with farmers’ tans; but a good sprinkling of women with coverings. The organizer and convener arrived and seemed too busy to speak with me; I finally sat down in the front row and Bob (not his real name) bustled up to the podium. He called the meeting to order. Just before I was to

welcome everyone and do the meditation, Bob shot a sideways glance – and went on to the following item on the agenda!

“ ‘Omigosh,’ I thought. ‘He’s chickened out! I’m such a liability to his organization’s area support that he’s going to skip me! But hey, *my congregation is hosting this event! I’m hosting this! They’re our guests!* And this is my only opportunity to ever talk to some of these good souls who have been so scared by this women in ministry thing that they’ve bailed out of conference ...

“Without any further thought, I popped up and interrupted him: ‘Bob, before we go any further with this, I’d like a few minutes to welcome you all to our church ... and will we still have time for the meditation you asked me to bring?’

“He looked a comical mixture of stunned and relieved and embarrassed. But without a word gave me the podium and I began. At first, the only people meeting my gaze were from my congregation. Then a few women with coverings began to cautiously look up; finally after some careful humor, people laughed and slowly we all arrived on the same page. By the end of my 10 minutes, I felt remarkably good rapport, considering the starting point. But I sat down feeling like I’d just run an emergency marathon.

“On the way home and later in the kitchen as I reported the incident to my husband, we laughed until I was limp at the absurdity and incongruity of it all: this would *never* have happened to a man, not the most ineffective male pastor in history! God, at the very least, couldn’t you have made me a foot taller, given me a heavy, jutting jaw line and a powerful carrying voice?”  
—*permission granted*

#### **H) Agreeing and disagreeing in love**

“As I began my first pastorate, it was clear that some in the congregation took issue with a woman in pastoral leadership, although the congregation as a whole had made a decision to consider female candidates. In conversation about this, my mentor suggested a forthright approach that I embraced as part of my initial work in ministry and that I continue today. So I’ve had frank conversations with those opposed to women in ministry to explore how I will be able to minister to them in ways that they will find acceptable and meaningful. This is the account of one of those conversations.

“I called yesterday to see if Mary and Charles would be home, and if you could come to visit that afternoon. They wouldn’t be available until late, but we made the arrangements. It was an extremely cold and windy day, with some snow accumulation. I wasn’t sure the reception would be any warmer. Mary greeted me warmly, saying she wasn’t sure I’d come as cold as it was. We sat down, and I asked Charles if he had had to work outside that day. He belted out, ‘Ya, what do you think!’ I responded that I just didn’t know if they had any livestock or animals or other work that would have necessitated his being outside. He said, ‘I have plenty of work to do outside but I’m not about to go out today!’

“So, we talked about their daughter and how things are going for her. We talked about their lives, their families of origin and how they met. Mary asked about my family, and we visited. After some pleasant talk, I told them that in addition to just wanting to visit and learn to know them better, I also wanted to talk to them regarding my being called to pastor, in light of what I know of Charles’ conviction about women in pastoral leadership. There was a lengthy interchange, but I think the most significant was when Charles said that this is what he believes that the Bible teaches, and he doesn’t know what would happen to him (his faith) if he denied that. I stated my respect for his conviction. His turmoil was something with which I could identify, for I wasn’t certain how my faith could survive if I didn’t respond to what I sensed as God’s call to me to pastor.

“After that Charles seemed quite free to mention all the things he considered to be errant in the way we do church, each time being quick to say that he is not judging. We agreed about some things and disagreed about others. I gained a respect for the deep commitment of this man and woman to what they believe is biblical, to their family and to the church.

“We also talked specifically about ways that I might minister that would be meaningful to them. Could I pray with them? Teach a Sunday school class in which they were members? Visit them if they became ill or were hospitalized? Would they be able to continue to attend church on days when I was preaching? I was actually surprised that the answer to all the questions was ‘yes.’

“I thanked them for their reception and for the visit. I asked if I could read a Psalm and if we could pray together. That was acceptable, and when the prayer was done, Charles had removed his glasses to wipe away tears. We talked a little more and sang a hymn together from the old red book, ‘Be Still My Soul.’

“Mary repeated several times, her appreciation for my coming in the cold and told me to watch my step in the cellar way as I left. Charles said, as I approached the door, to be careful not to slip on the ice.

“It hasn't been all smooth sailing since our initial conversation that day. Yet, the effort was an investment into my relationship with these dear people and with the congregation as a pastor. I don't have any expectation that Charles' position or mine will change very much. It is my prayer that our relationship will continue to grow, even slowly so that one day when either of us thinks of the other, it will be our common faith in Christ and mutual respect for one another that first comes to mind, and our point of disagreement on this issue, that will occur to us only as an afterthought.” —*permission granted*

### **I) *She's preaching again***

“Several years ago my husband and I became co-pastors of a congregation. In that role I was the first woman pastor in this church. One couple in this congregation didn't believe that women should be pastors. They left after Sunday school every time I was scheduled to preach. I knew they were moving away within a year. So I didn't make a big deal about it; they didn't either.” —*permission granted*

### **Body Stories**

#### **A) The new mom**

1) “Upon the birth of our first child, the fun-loving congregation held a baby shower with everyone from the church (men, women, and children) invited. One of the party activities was for everyone to submit advice for me as the new mother/pastor. Among the submissions was the suggestion that ‘anything goes—except nursing at the pulpit!’” —*permission granted*

2) “The day after my second child was born, I came home from the hospital and we decided to go to supper at the church (why cook?). Most members hadn't heard yet that Aaron had arrived and they were so surprised and excited to see him. Most thought I was crazy to be at the church the day after he was born, but I think they were honored that I viewed them as my ‘family.’” —*Janeen Bertsche Johnson*

#### **B) I thought it was chapstick**

“While I was listening intently to a student in my office, I also became aware how dry my mouth was and that I should use my chapstick. Not breaking eye contact, I reached into my purse for it. I had my hand up to my mouth when I realized I was holding a tampon. She and I both laughed.” —*Sylvia Shirk Charles*

**C) The nursing pastor**

1) "I have served on the Mission Network board of directors for the past four years. My first meeting with the board, I brought my daughter who was 5 months old. I continued to take her with me until she was 2. Somehow, I was able to find someone to take care of her during my meetings each time. She celebrated her first birthday with the board in Philadelphia.

"I have a vivid memory of the board's second meeting in the fall of 2001 in Oregon. My daughter was about 10 months old and an avid nurser. I never had problems with milk production, except over-production. I spent those meetings restlessly waiting for the moment when I could retrieve my daughter and have her empty my painfully full breasts.

"I remember on Sunday morning attending worship in a local Mennonite congregation, standing in the foyer and feeling something wet on my feet. It took me a moment to realize that my breasts were leaking milk and it was dripping down on my feet instead of being absorbed by my dress. I grabbed my daughter from my husband and found the nursery so I could ease the problem in private." —*permission granted*

2) "A breastfeeding story that I'm not sure I'm proud of . . . I once was breastfeeding my son after worship and noticed a new family preparing to leave. I hadn't talked with them yet and wanted to do so before they left. I got up (with my son still latched to my breast) and ran after them to speak to them. My actions came before my thoughts and all of a sudden, I realized I was standing there, my son breastfeeding, and my trying to have a conversation with people new to our congregation who might think I was really, really strange. They never did come back, although I don't know the exact reason why!" —*permission granted*

3) "During the years I was nursing my son, my breasts have started leaking in public at different times. I now always wear a jacket or sweater when I preach, no matter how hot!" —*Sheri Hostetler*

4) "At my ordination, I barely made it through the service with out having to nurse my 10-month-old son. As I greeted people after the service, he was at my breast. They did not seem phased since I have lead singing while nursing as well. I have been told by a number of women that seeing a nursing mother taking leadership in the church gives them a whole new image of God." —*Cynthia Lapp*

5) "My biggest fear in entering ministry has always been one of concern for the welfare of our children. Will they be neglected or suffer in any way because of my ministry? This fear was alive and well when my husband and I were interviewed for our present position as co-pastors.

"Our youngest child was only 8 weeks old at the time and despite our best efforts to feed her before arriving, began to fuss and cry 30 minutes into our first interview. She needed to nurse! As I looked around the table of the search committee for any potential allies, I saw three men (two with gray hair) and two women. Of what I learned from opening introductions, one woman didn't have any children and the other woman's children were grown. The only one closest to my position in life was a young mom of three who unfortunately couldn't be present at that first interview because her kids were sick. So what should I do?



“Despite a few brief moments of panic when I silently begged for God to ‘get me out of here –NOW!’, I did find in Him the strength and encouragement I needed to do what I had to do: nurse my hungry baby (yes—while still continuing with the interview!) A few minutes later, I did comment on the nursing baby: yes, it was awkward for me and likely for them. But I also mentioned I had just come from serving on an all-male ministerial staff and it’s amazing how everyone gets used to a nursing mom after awhile... and the interview continued ... with a very content baby.

“After the interview was over, I cried all the way home. I thought that the whole nursing baby scene was probably a disaster. For who would want a pastor with such young children? At that time, our other children were ages 3, 5, 9, 12, 14, 16 and 18. Yes, you counted correctly – we have eight! The next morning, the woman from conference who was assisting the process put my fears to rest and told us how impressed the search committee was with the baby and at how calm we were through the interview. God does work in mysterious ways.

“Shortly after that experience, while reviewing a conference resource package of general guidelines to help prepare for an interview with a search committee, I found this statement: ‘The goal is to discover the truth about each other. Self-disclosure to each other is the most effective means to move that process forward.’ Self-disclosure? I don’t think the authors of that statement had in mind a pastor nursing a baby in an interview—however, reading the statement after the fact sure gave me a good laugh!”

—*Linda Brnjas*

#### **D) Pregnant Preacher**

“After beginning ministry as a 30 year old who had married 11 years earlier, I was ready to start a family soon. I conceived my first children about nine months into my ministry experience. I was the first woman pastor in this congregation, so it was a new experience to have a pregnant pastor. Literally, having a pregnant pastor kind of grew on my home congregation and wasn’t really an issue. However, it was different for others who weren’t used to this phenomenon.

“One morning when I was about eight months pregnant, I preached in another Mennonite congregation in the same community as part of a pulpit exchange Sunday. Immediately after the service, an older woman quickly came up to me and exclaimed, ‘I never heard a sermon by a pregnant preacher before!’ How is one to respond to that kind of comment? I honestly can’t remember what I said, but I remember being at a loss for words. I suspect she heard very little about what I said because she was distracted by my very rounded belly!” —*Brenda Martin Hurst*

#### **E) Life in the fish bowl**

‘My husband and I experienced secondary infertility when we tried to conceive a second child while serving that same congregation. After trying for some time, we sought help from an infertility clinic about an hour away. It was decided we would try artificial insemination procedures for six monthly cycles. So I had to take my temperature every morning to track when I was ovulating. And on the morning when my test showed I was ovulating, I had to call in to the clinic and arrange an appointment for the next morning. Wouldn’t you know, the very first time the test showed I was ovulating was a Saturday morning. When I called in, the nurse said, ‘Be here at 9:30 a.m. tomorrow morning (Sunday) to have your first procedure. ‘But we’re pastors and our worship service starts at 9:30 a.m. tomorrow morning. Can’t we come later in the day?’ I explained. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘It’s either tomorrow morning at 9:30 a.m. or not at all!’

“I couldn’t believe it. I wasn’t about to miss this opportunity to conceive a child and of course, was so very hopeful conception would happen the first time. So, I sheepishly called the head deacon and explained our situation. She graciously gave us the freedom to take the appointment

and we quickly arranged alternative plans for the Sunday morning service. The real irony was that this particular Sunday was the last in a seven Sunday series on human sexuality in which we were going to celebrate our sexuality! We arranged for a hymn sing instead. But of course, someone had to explain to the congregation why we were suddenly absent. While the details weren't given, it was shared, I believe, that we needed to keep an appointment at an infertility clinic.

"My husband and I have vivid memories of sitting in a little restaurant close to the clinic while his sperm was being 'washed' and prepared for insemination, laughing our heads off at the time and irony of it all! We realized then how public our lives are as pastors.

"The next day, my husband met some male church members at the farm coop gas station. They teased him about where he was yesterday morning.

"Unbelievably, twice in this six-month period, we had to go to the clinic on a Sunday morning at 9:30 a.m. We never did conceive a child through this crazy process; but we did receive a beautiful child through adoption a couple of years later. Thanks be to God." —*Brenda Martin Hurst*

#### **F) I've been hosed!**

"I was on my way to do a funeral and ripped my hose getting out of the car. I was early and went to the nearest drugstore and purchased 'thigh highs'. I returned to the funeral home and was giving emotional and spiritual support to those present, when I felt my hose slowly slipping down my legs. I retreated to the restroom and they were removed.

"I was wearing an ankle length skirt; which helped my situation. I was the only one who was aware of the episode but it kept my mind in perspective of the important part of life and still being able to experience humor. The service started on time and no one was the wiser." —*Vickie Yoder*

#### **G) Clothing matters**

"I made the mistake of wearing pants at an inter-Mennonite event where I was leading worship and the minister got a letter about that later." —*Elsie Epp*

#### **Expectation Stories:**

##### **A) Juggling**

"I have yet to meet a male pastor who was asked to lead a funeral service and bring two pies to the fellowship meal afterwards." —*Jan Kraus*

##### **B) Practically speaking**

1) "Women have the ongoing challenge of using lapel mics which are designed to hook on to a man's tie and trousers, not user friendly for women's dresses!" —*Barbara Moyer Lehman*

2) While serving the Nappanee UMC one Sunday I was wired to speak, the sound booth was on and I made a trip to the bathroom while my speaker/mic was on. The congregation rolled with laughter. I couldn't figure out what was so funny. —*Janet McFall Brown*

##### **C) Oops ...**

"One day a gentleman from the church called me on the phone and was telling me about something. I became distracted, thinking of something else, and I responded with 'Yes,

*sweetheart,*' the endearment for my husband. There was a silence at the other end and the conversation quickly ended.

"I was mortified! This man, demure and modest in character, could easily take my comment as a come-on. I talked over my dilemma with my husband.

"The next Sunday, we had a fellowship meal at church. My plan of action involved my husband and this man's wife. My husband and I placed ourselves next in line with them. In the course of the conversation, I mentioned how embarrassed I was that I had called him sweetheart. Of course, I had to admit that I was thinking of something else and not really listening to what he was saying to me at all. The four of us had a good laugh, and as far as I know that was the end."

—*Mattie Marie Mast*

### **Pastoral Care Stories:**

#### **A) In unexpected places**

"As a woman pastor, I have been able to go places where men are not able to go. When an 80 year old woman's husband died, she called me to her home late at night. We prayed together when the doctor left. The body was to be picked up in the morning. I volunteered to spend the night with this elderly sister. She welcomed my staying and lent me a nightgown. I thought I'd stay in the guest room (her husband's body was in another bedroom) but the woman asked if I'd come and sleep in the double bed with her. When the lights went out this dear sister began to tell the story about how she and her husband met, fell in love, and spent 50 plus years together. We cried together and also laughed a lot. My last thought before falling asleep was that a male pastor would not have been invited to do this and would have missed out on some of these great stories that get shared at a 'sleepover' on the night of a beloved husband's passing."

—*Ingrid Schultz*

#### **B) Walking the line**

"As a pastor in a welcoming congregation, I walk a fine line between speaking loudly and clearly my welcome and relating to the few people in the congregation who may not share the same theology. I most frequently have lunch with two different women from the congregation. One is a lesbian woman with whom I have walked closely as she has tried to heal from the pain she carries from being treated badly by the church. The other is a woman who thinks that the church is sinning by having gay and lesbian members. Both of them trust me with the pain and struggles of their lives. Relating to both these women as friend and pastor keeps me humble and perhaps less 'prophetic' than I might be." —*permission granted*

#### **C) A clear sense of pastoral identity**

1) "I made a hospital visit to a conference bishop. He commented that it must make me nervous to visit a bishop. I quickly replied, 'No, I count it a privilege.' Sometimes, other patients ask if I don't bring my husband along when I make hospital visits.'" —*Jean Kraybill Shenk*

2) "I was visiting a woman in a nursing home, who was increasingly suffering from dementia, although she still knew me when I came to see her. During my visit her daughter and son-in-law came in, and she introduced me to her children: 'This is Melinda (not her real name). She used to preach at our church before we got a preacher, and she can preach as good as a man!' (I had been the solo pastor for a year before I was joined by a male co-pastor.) I decided to take this comment as a compliment coming from a 90 plus year old woman—and I got a good laugh out of it too!" —*permission granted*

**D) You want me to do what?**

“We have an older, mentally challenged woman in our congregation. Her culture is decidedly ‘mountain’—little education, lots of folklore, poor. She is a bit of a hypochondriac and depends on government funding; so frequently, our tax dollars are paying for a doctor visit. I have accompanied her to the emergency room as well as regular doctor visits, and have seen this doctor in action with her. He is compassionate, but knows the tests he orders are more to allay her fears than anything else. The doctor struggles with how best to work with this woman. Usually, he is able to send her home with some remedy in which she can trust, even if it really is a placebo.

“At one point, she had had a minor growth removed. It was an outpatient office visit and she’d been sent home. She called me to ask if I could come over to see her. She was in a panic. She panics when it storms and she panics if her brothers leave her home alone for too long. I agreed to come.

“Driving up the very rutted mountain lane with the washed out gravel is an adventure in itself. When I reached the top, I was greeted by her older brother, as he let loose a stream of tobacco juice. I made my way into their house, through the mewling cats and barking dogs in the yard. She was so relieved to see me.

“She invited me into her bathroom, where she told me she had not been able to bring herself to change the dressing on her wound. She had been instructed to do so but she couldn’t make herself pull off the adhesive. She couldn’t have asked either of her brothers—her sole housemates—for help because of the location of the wound, she explained. Would I please help her change the dressing. Oh, and by the way, she warned me, ‘I’m not wearing a bra.’ She then bared her chest—ALL of it to show me the bandage on her abdomen. I am not a nurse. Our God, who made me, did not call me to be a nurse, because God knows my constitution!

“I picked at the adhesive, while the woman let out little yelps. Finally, I told her, ‘I’m going to just pull this adhesive off. Are you ready?’ She nodded, I pulled, she screamed. Then she thanked me for getting that adhesive off as it had really been bothering her, she said.

“Then, I gently removed the packing to find an oozing wound with thick, yellow pus. I nearly lost it. But remembering that I was supposed to be a professional pastor, I cleaned the wound, repacked it and bandaged it.

“Next, she wondered if I would help her put on her bra. She hadn’t put one on because the bandage had pulled when she’d tried earlier that morning. I helped her with her bra. She was very thankful. I drove back down the lane, knowing she would never have asked a male pastor to make this kind of pastoral visit. I had recently read some of Jan Karon’s tales from Mitford, and thought to myself that Father Tim had nothing over on me! This experience could certainly compete with some of the situations in which he found himself!

“When I arrived in my office, I called one of our members who is a nurse and described what I had just experienced. She agreed that changing dressings didn’t exactly fall under my pastoral responsibilities and also volunteered to brave the lane to check up on our mountain woman.

“She reported to me later that the wound had healed nicely. There had never again been any more thick, yellow pus. Apparently, that sight had been for my eyes only. Lucky me!” —  
*permission granted*

**E) A Miller Lite funeral**

“Women pastors are often asked to perform services that are not the norm, for community persons that they know. I believe it is because women tend to be less professionally threatening than men that we are invited into the lives of neighbors.

“A local grain elevator owner who had long ago left the church, died and was cremated. Several months later the family decided to bury his ashes in a small community cemetery. The November day turned out to be gray and raining as we stood beside the grave of this man in a bleak rural cemetery. The scene was straight out of Dickens.

“As I began the service, the cold rain pelted down harder. The local undertaker had decided not to put up a tent for this service since it was to be short and he was not known for going the extra mile for families anyway. He just believed that relaxed was better than perfect when it came to funerals.

“With the continuing rain, the pages of my Bible became transparent and they grew difficult to read. But there still was the burial to complete. Finally, the undertaker sent his assistant to the car to get some umbrellas to hold over the heads of the mourners. This welcome relief turned into inner giggles though as the assistant opened each red and white striped umbrella and I saw that each one had printed on it, ‘Miller Lite’.—*Anne Stuckey*

**F) I can't believe my eyes**

“There was a family, single mom with children, who lived down the street from our church. I had met her on occasion and discovered that one of her children had been hospitalized. I decided to take a meal and visit her to show my concern.

“Upon arriving at her house, I saw her and her boyfriend standing outside the front door staring out across the yard. As I walked up to the door with the meal, I was instructed to take it into the house. Upon entering, I spoke with a teenager who lived there and attended our church. After a bit, the mom entered and was crying. Thinking it was about her son in the hospital, I inquired how he was doing. The child was doing fine but come to find out that afternoon, upon coming home from the hospital, one of their favorite dogs had died by wrapping itself in its leash.

“I expressed sympathy for losing a pet and was turning to go when the mom asked me to wait just a minute. She walked into the other room and returned holding a cold, stiff dead dog which she had placed in the freezer to preserve. My mouth dropped open, given that dogs are not my favorite animal, to see her weeping and holding this poor creature.

“Later that day as I was telling a friend about this experience, she informed me that this lady may call me to do a funeral service for the dog. I know that pastoral care involves many things, but I never imagined it including having a funeral for a dog. Thankfully I was never called to do this service; however, I did develop a relationship with this young mom.” —*Marilyn Handrich Bender*

**Reflection Stories**

**They are His**

And so, I am a pastor,  
A surrogate mother of sorts,  
To a group of people  
Who are as much a part of me  
As my own blood.

Yet, I am only the nanny.  
They bear His name, not mine.

The true family intimacy  
Will never be with me,  
But with him.  
In the end they will be known only  
As His children.  
And I will be but a memory for some.

I am just a midwife,  
Stepping up to coach them,  
To catch them in the light.  
Then to lay them in their Parent's arms  
To quietly gather my things  
And respectfully step outside the door.

I am only the opair  
Who gives him a list each day  
Of what they need and how they've been  
And the problems they have had.  
A list which he reads,  
Then lays to the side,  
And does what he knows is best for them  
For they are His.

And as I go to my quarters for the night  
It is He who tucks them in.  
Speaks the last words they will hear.  
For they are His.

But with him.  
In the end they will be known only  
As His children.  
And I will be but a memory for some.

I am just a midwife,  
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For they are His.

And as I go to my quarters for the night  
It is He who tucks them in.  
Speaks the last words they will hear.  
For they are His.

I am only the baby sitter  
Whose greatest authority  
Comes in asking,  
'What will your Father say?'  
And I will ask myself.  
'What would He want?'  
They are not mine.

It is illegal, Dangerous even,  
To pass them off as mine.  
I may be the wet nurse,  
But their source of life  
Is Him  
Not me.

So like Jochebed did one fateful day  
Today I climb the palace stairs  
Lay them in another's arms,  
Then turn and walk away.  
They are not mine.

If I love them too much,  
I lead them astray.  
They can not serve God  
I am only the baby sitter  
Whose greatest authority  
Comes in asking,  
'What will your Father say?'  
And I will ask myself.  
'What would He want?'  
They are not mine.

It is illegal, Dangerous even,  
To pass them off as mine.  
I may be the wet nurse,  
But their source of life  
Is Him  
Not me.

So like Jochebed did one fateful day  
Today I climb the palace stairs  
Lay them in another's arms,  
Then turn and walk away.  
They are not mine.

If I love them too much,  
I lead them astray.  
They can not serve God  
And Ms Elaine.

And so I care for them,  
Train them,  
And love them  
As if they were mine.

Like any good foster mother.  
But I remember,  
'They do not belong to me'.  
For they are His.  
They are not mine.

*Elaine Maust 2002*

### **A baby dedication**

"It was my first baby dedication. I would get to hold Elijah, look into his eyes and offer the blessing of God's love on his life. I would get to pray over his parents and commit with the rest of the congregation to help in the raising of this young boy. I felt the importance of this ritual deep in my heart as I had just recently stood on that platform and handed my firstborn to the pastor for dedication. The words of blessing flowed from my soul along with joyful tears. This was a blessing not only from the heart of a pastor, but the heart of a mother. And as I looked up from Elijah's face into the congregation, I saw that they, too, knew this was a special moment, a wide and deep connection between God and God's people." —*permission granted*

### **Sweet!**

"As a single, female, non-mother, pastor I have an extra gift to give to children in my congregation—the gift of mothering and attention. Each child in my congregation has become a part of me in a way that wouldn't (couldn't) happen if I had a child (children) of my own. Each Sunday, after church and after most of the congregation has left the sanctuary (which is an unbearably long time for some of the younger children) I head for my office to hand out candy. The children often invite visiting children to come along. And the 'children' are sometimes as old as the youth and an occasional parent – and recently, an 88 year old woman enjoyed a piece from the bowl! Giving out candy allows me to have a brief moment with each child every Sunday. Occasionally, if I'm missing for more than one Sunday, I write a note, attach a piece of candy, and put it in each child's worship bag. I also try to attend children's school and sports activities. And occasionally take a youth out for a meal, especially if I know something is happening in their lives. This year I sent my first students off to college. I'll miss them. —*Dawn Ranck*

### **I've Got to Be Me!**

"When I began serving in conference leadership, I found that I was the only woman in many churchwide leadership meetings. One advantage of being the only woman at an out-of-town meeting was not having to share a hotel room!

"When I was the only woman in the group, I found that I didn't think like the men and brought a different perspective to the group discussions. My views were always the minority view point and therefore easily ignored. Even among men who were very accepting of women in leadership I found that I spoke a different language. I would make an observation or a suggestion but it was not incorporated into the thinking and action of the group until it was restated by a male member of the group.

"Over a period of time I began to think there was something wrong with me because I was not like the male leaders with whom I worked. I started to think that I must not be a good leader or maybe not meant to be a leader at all! Then I attended a workshop on women's leadership style and how it differs from the male leadership style. A load was lifted and I shed tears of relief as I recognized, 'This is who I am and its okay! God has not called me to be like the men with whom I work but has placed me in their midst to bring gifts that are different from what they can offer.'



“Although there are some basic leadership principles that apply to both men and women, I need to continually remind myself not to be unduly influenced by the expectations placed on leaders in male-dominated world (church). I need to develop my own style of leadership based on the gifts and personality God has given me.

“In the Hispanic Mennonite churches with which I work I have had a very different experience. There I am called ‘la misionera’ and am honored to a degree that becomes uncomfortable at times. This is because of the memories people have of women missionaries who lived and worked among them in their homelands and the great respect they have for these women who dedicated their lives to church and community service. I am challenged to be faithful to the images created by those who have gone before me modeling self-sacrificing leadership for the sake of the gospel.” —*Miriam Martin*

**The first time I baptized people**

“It was a brother and sister my husband and I were baptizing. We were at their pond on their property with their whole family and our church. We were in the water up to our waists and ready to baptize first the brother and then the sister by immersion. It felt so intimate spiritually with God, with my husband, with the two young people and with the congregation. I felt so full of God’s love, what a joy and privilege it is that we as pastors get to baptize people! As we said the words ‘we baptize you in the name of Jesus Christ’ and put him down in the water, suddenly frogs from the pond began to croak and sing! It was as if all nature joined in to worship God! It was so beautiful. The frogs continued to sing and croak as we baptized the sister. Many from the congregation noticed it too and many shed tears of joy. The Holy Spirit definitely touched over us that day. I felt so blessed to be able to experience baptizing someone, and I felt as if my husband and I grew closer as a couple and closer to God by ministering together in that way.”  
—*unknown*