

John Calvin Presbytery
November 01, 2025

Two Hundred-Twentieth Stated Meeting
Trinity Presbyterian Church,
Springfield, Missouri

Faith Journey – Susan Murray
August 2024

Typically, when someone shares how they were called to a ministry, it is upbeat and inspiring. I'm not sure my journey is. My dad's parents were Catholic and Presbyterian; his parents decided to let the children pick their own faith. He picked Presbyterian because it was less work to join the church. My mother's parents were Methodist and Baptist. When they were married in their small town in NW Missouri, they raised my mom and her brothers in the Baptist church. When my parents married, they picked the Presbyterian Church and raised us accordingly.

My father was in the U.S. Air Force, and we moved often. We would typically join the local Presbyterian Church, in part to make connections with people not on the air force base. When I was in high school, we lived in Korea and attended the base chapel. There were about six chaplains, one Catholic and five Protestants. When you attended a protestant worship service, you saw a variety of styles and faith beliefs. I was very involved with the chapel youth group, and I remember distinctly one meeting where the all-male chaplains held a panel discussion, and we were to ask questions. I asked a question with no hidden agenda; I wanted to learn and understand. My question was "Where does your denomination stand on ordaining women and why?" The Catholic chaplain didn't speak but looked very uncomfortable. The evangelical chaplain from a denomination I had never heard of tried to answer, but it was exceedingly awkward. Mind you, I had never seen a female faith leader in my life. After a bit of foundering by the others, the Christian Scientist chaplain smiled and said, "I am good because my church was founded by a woman."

That encounter left me with the message that women were not welcome to be leaders in the church. This was the late 1970s. Later, when the Presbyterian Church merged in the early 1980s, my mother shared concerns about the impact the southern church might have on the role of women and the Presbyterian Women (PW) organization. She had a real fear that our church would move backwards with respect to women. At this time, I was in college and started to realize that I was a lesbian. While the church ordained women, I saw repeatedly in the news how the church treated Rev. Jane Spahr time and time again as they blocked her efforts to serve God. That left me with the message that LGBT people are not welcome to be leaders in the church. Years later, I saw the Stole Project, which powerfully displays how LGBT people were pushed from ministry. To this day, I remember a story pinned to one of the stoles. This person had gone to seminary and was ordained, only to be rejected. They left the church and were selling air conditioners at Sears.

In 1998, I met my now wife, Julie. I joked that she was at her Presbyterian Church any time the doors were open, and if they weren't open, she had a key. She was beloved by her church; I was accepted. When we wanted to have a commitment ceremony in 2000, all sorts of chaos started. Things were said and done to us that should never be done by a church. We were outed on church letterhead in a letter we did not write. The session had more meetings about us than anyone can remember. At least two members contacted lawyers. The late Rev. Kelly Allen was our minister. She was the lone beacon that God loved us. She gently worked the process so we could have a commitment ceremony, not a wedding, in our church. She later was a candidate for moderator of the general assembly in 2014 and died in 2016. That experience left me with the message that we were welcome but were clearly second-class citizens.

After our ceremony, I was nominated to be an elder. For the first time ever in our church, the examination was very rigorous. I was asked questions about the Book of Order, the Book of Confessions, and my beliefs. We even

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had a lengthy discussion about predestination, which I have never fully understood. At the time of the congregation meeting, there was loud verbal votes of dissent against my election as an elder. That experience left me with the message that some people do not feel I am worthy to participate in the work of God's church.

Our family moved to Rolla in 2002. Rev. Kelly Allen reached out to Rev. Miles White, the minister at the time, to encourage acceptance for us. Over the 20 years we have been involved, the journey has had its ups and downs, but overall, we have been accepted or at least tolerated. I have served as an elder for several terms. While Rev. Lou Ellen Hartly was our minister, I became the clerk of session.

When she left and we couldn't find an interim or pulpit supply, I started preaching. As a university professor, public speaking hasn't been an issue for me. I have continued to preach once or twice a month for the last three years. In the fall of 2022, I started taking CRE classes at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary (UDTS). Another elder at my church, Jonathan Kimball, had taken the coursework and spoke positively of the program. I started with classes that would improve my sermons and my Bible knowledge. I took polity to support my role as a clerk, and now somehow I'm in my last class. I don't know what my next step will be. I expect I will retire from the university in approximately three to five years.

If you had asked if I was called for ministry in my 20s, 30s, or 40s. I would have said I have skills and a compassionate heart, but if God were trying to call me, others are making it impossible for me to serve. If you asked me in my 50s, I would likely have said I have skills and knowledge, and I am serving the church and God with them. In the last two or three years, if asked again, I would say I am not qualified. I am a sinner and have fallen short over and over again. I have grown a great deal in the CRE program at UDTS. I have realized that God never rejected me; others did. I have also moved from a mindset of "this isn't fair." To a deep understanding that I am not worthy, yet God loves me, and Jesus died for me, and my sins are forgiven.

Rev. Diane Cooke and Rev. Bob Dahlgren have been supportive for the last three years. Diane listened to the pain I felt when a guest stood up during my sermon and walked out because it was apparent I was a lesbian after I casually said "my wife and kids" in a sermon. They both listened to my uncertainty about meeting with grieving parents and spouses preparing for funerals. They both listened when I shared the excitement that I had helped people during their worst times. Bob has been very supportive, and he thinks I have a heart for ministry.

So, I don't know what I am called to do. I am certainly no better than anyone else, perhaps worse than many. However, God has given me some gifts, and I am learning and growing in my faith. I am willing to stand up and share what I have learned, how God loves us, and encourage others to have faith. I will never preach a "fire and brimstone" sermon or one that condemns. Rather, I am like the beggar who has found food and is sharing that knowledge with others.

I did not enjoy feelings of rejection in my life because I was a woman and a lesbian, but they have made me much more compassionate and accepting of others. I know we are not to judge or criticize others on their faith journey, but rather to support and encourage. When I face rejection and discrimination, I seek to forgive and be patient. I guess my calling is to share the good news of God's love and forgiveness and to attempt to show that love through a smile, hug, prayer, or listening ear.