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Sue Westhorp, 14 July 2012

My Story

My story is no more interesting or exciting or important than anyone else's, so I feel quite privileged to be able to share it with you. All of our stories are important and valuable, and it's good that we treasure them and get to share them with each other. My story is special only in the sense that it is my story and it doesn't belong to anyone else. But in a sense it's not just my story. It's a story that involves so many other people, like my parents, who, quite independently of me being asked to speak, decided to come here today. And there's my husband, Peter, who supports me so much through the struggles of the journey. And there's my son, Jonathon, who knows no different, that his Mum would like to be a pastor, and who sees the results of some of the angst. There's also my wider family, and many of you here who have been part of the journey – and such an important part of it for me.

Like many people my age I grew up in a post-feminist world. There was nowhere else that told me that I couldn't do what I wanted to do when I grew up – except the church. I had that childhood sense of wanting to be a pastor that's not really that unique – practising at home, preaching to the toys or my younger siblings – and I thought "I'd really like to be a pastor one day". Then I realised that the church doesn't actually allow women to be pastors, and I thought, "Oh well." I've never had a dramatic word from God, and I've wondered sometimes if that would have been easier – who can argue with the voice of God? But I've had encouragement from others and recognition of my gifts and abilities, the gifts and abilities that God has given me, plus a strong desire to serve in this way.

In my teen years, as my sense of calling became stronger, a couple of my pastors encouraged me to think about going to the US to study and becoming ordained there. It seemed impractical and unachievable but it was nice to feel supported. I went on to study music, in particular church music, and I still have a great passion for that. I enjoyed my Uni years and studying music, but there was something missing. I met my future husband at our church, and when I started to talk to him about my calling he said, "We've got to do something about it – you're going to Sem." It had been a dream for so long – this mythical, wonderful place called 'the Sem.'!

So the next part of the journey began here, in this place. A place that seemed to hold so much potential! Even as I stand here talking to you, I can recall the huge sense of excitement I felt at finally coming to study at the Sem! I can also recall other feelings of fear that came later on – shaking in my boots, sitting in the Greek winter school waiting for my turn to translate (clumsily, I might add!).

But, back to the rosy beginning! A warm, welcoming letter from Peter Lockwood informed me that I had been accepted to study for the Bachelor of Arts in Theology. I prepared to move interstate, to leave the security and comfort of my family and friends and venture forth on a journey of theological discovery that would ultimately lead to ordination – after all, surely the church would be ordaining women in four years time, wouldn't they? My experience here at Sem contained some great highs. The study was fantastic and the opportunity to use my musical skills here was a great gift. I wrote a lot of my liturgical music here 2





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for the Sem. Choir, and I played for worship. My classmates, in particular my partner in crime, Allie, contributed much to my learning and formation, for which I'll always be grateful.

There were also some harder times, such as Allie and I having to fight in our first year to be allowed to be part of the BTh program. And there was the time I naively spoke to a final year student on my first outing to the Welly pub about my call to ordained ministry and being told by him that the only call I had was from the devil.

Amongst the ups and downs, I enjoyed hanging out with the boys, having been a tomboy for most of my life, but as the years of study progressed and there were more and more subjects that Allie and I were excluded from, it felt as though I was hanging around the edges of a club that I'd never be asked to join – a common experience for the women at the Sem. It's an experience that's carried through to many LCA synods and gatherings, where I felt tolerated for a while, and then shut out when the serious theological and ministry talk began.

So, after four years of study (and getting married and giving birth), we packed our bags and headed back to Melbourne, unsure of what God had in store for us but with some important learnings gathered along the way:

- The LCA is quite different from our home parish
- The church has factions
- I needed to be careful who I spoke to about my sense of call
- Labels aren't helpful. I am high-church, liturgical and confessional with a twist of feminism and a dash of liberalism – does that help anyone understand who I really am?

So back in Melbourne, I settled into motherhood, and into my church community who had sent me off four years earlier, full of hopes and dreams. It felt like I landed back in reality with a mighty thud!

When we're told 'no' we adjust, we find other ways of being, of answering the call, and for a while it seems as though it will suffice. So I slowly built up hours of work at St Paul's Box Hill – first in music, then in pastoral care, and then adding adult education until I had a wonderful full-time lay position in the church – and I thought that surely this must answer all of my callings. And yet it didn't. There was always part of the ministry that was missing, a 'fullness' of ministry. To compensate for the fact that I couldn't do what I strongly felt called to do, I upped my LCA involvement significantly, chairing the Dept of Music and sitting on the Dept of Liturgics and Commission on Worship for about 10 years, always striving to prove my leadership and theological capabilities. I even planned music for three general synods, and for the last one I planned all of the worship and I got to tell the pastors what to do! I think my motto was "if you can't join them, beat them"! I enjoyed that work and always looked forward to meetings in Adelaide. Usually I left disappointed because I didn't feel taken seriously, or my ideas were only accepted if they were repeated later by one of the male members. It frustrated me beyond belief that my knowledge and years of





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experience were acknowledged only by a scant few, but I did appreciate that I was acknowledged by those few.

The stress of all of this, combined with some stressful issues in the workplace, led me into an episode of serious clinical depression, a very “dark night of the soul”. Coming out of that time, I had 3 my first experience of Clinical Pastoral Education or CPE. Those of you who have done CPE might also have had the experience of saying, “Why the hell didn’t anyone tell me about this before?”!!!! It was fantastic! I found new ways of doing theological reflection, new ways of doing ministry. I received affirmation of my calling and I had my first preaching experience.

Leading on from this, I began work in hospital chaplaincy and lessened my congregational employment. It was a positive thing for me to work outside the church and realise the value of my ministry to other people. When I started working in chaplaincy, I was often told that chaplains exist on the fringes of their churches and that often ministry of chaplaincy is not valued or understood – so I felt like I’d found a home and I still do. I spent some time in Lutheran hospital chaplaincy but found that quite limiting, so I applied for a position in palliative care chaplaincy. This involves multi-faith ministry – it doesn’t compromise who I am as a Christian or a Lutheran – and I work with people to help them make meaning out of what they are experiencing in hospital. And I love it. As I transitioned from church to hospital, I experienced some anger that I was at last being recognised for my gifts and abilities, whereas in the church I hadn’t been.

As I’ve moved out of LCA employment, I have also had to relinquish my other LCA involvements, such as the Commission on Worship, because I can no longer take days off to attend meetings. Another commitment that has had to go is the LCA/UCA dialogue, and I am particularly sad about this. At this dialogue I experienced a safe place, empathy, and a sharing of the pain of the journey. The ecumenical experience I now have in the work place is fantastic! The things I experience with my chaplaincy colleagues are wonderful:

- They have such an awareness of my sadness and struggle.
- They include me: one of my Anglican colleagues was ordained and priested last year – she wanted to share her first eucharist at the hospital with me and so asked me to preach. Last month my UCA colleague asked me to present him with the chalice and paten at his commissioning because of what they represent for me.
- They give me invaluable support for the journey.

My work now:

- Ministry to people at the most vulnerable and profound times of their lives
- Participation in pastoral care departments that includes regular preaching
- Recognition of my skill and gifts without any agendas





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- Provides me with professional satisfaction at a level I never experienced in the church
- Allows me some distance from a church that continues to be a painful place – whether on a local congregational level or at a synodical level.

Where to now?

- My home, for now, is in hospital chaplaincy, and yet there is still something missing, something I can't do.
- I hope to begin training as a CPE supervisor next year.
- I'd like to do some further study – perhaps some preaching subjects.
- I choose to stay in the LCA – it is part of my spiritual DNA, my roots – I can't leave, as much as my colleagues might want me to. This sometimes feels as though it sits in tension with Jesus' call to leave behind mother and brothers and sisters to follow him.
- I need to resist the erosion of my self-esteem that often comes with being told that I can't do what I think God is calling me to.
- I need to resist the bitterness that can follow anger.
- I need to find ways of discerning my call – is there a process to discern the call to ordained ministry for women that doesn't involve an LCA call to a parish?

And if the church decided to ordain women next year – what would this mean for me?

- Could I continue in my current work and still be ordained?
- Would I want to go into a parish?
- Could my family put up with yet more study?
- There would be sadness that some of my closest friends would refuse communion from me if I was ordained.

I'm now about the age that the 'older and wiser' women were when I started Sem. I remember thinking it must be so hard to keep fighting when you may be too old once it comes in – and now I'm in the same place, a generation later. I remember after the vote at the Toowoomba Synod, a pastor friend remarked that the ordination of women was inevitable but it could take up to 100 years to come into effect. I didn't want to hear that. I wanted to hear about how it was going to change while I still had a chance. And that's where I find myself now – living with two hopes that sometimes find themselves in tension: on the one hand, wanting the ordination of women to become a reality for the sake of the church and the gospel; and on the other, wanting it to become my own personal reality.





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I have two images or symbols that sustain me on my journey: The first is the image of the crucified Christ - the Christ who knows pain, who knows rejection, who knows suffering – this is the Christ I carry as I visit patients and families in my work, this is the Christ who carries me in my pain about ordination.

The second symbol that sustains me is something I was given by Elizabeth Pech, wife of the late Pastor Herman Pech, to whom I had the privilege of ministering in his last days. Elizabeth gave me Herman's home communion set when she was moving from her home to a retirement village. When Elizabeth first gave this to me, I decided to leave the vessels exactly the way they were – unpolished, with a hint of Herman still about them. A couple of months ago, I decided to clean them so they were ready for use. For me this is like the maidens keeping their lamps trimmed – this is both a symbol of what I cannot yet do, and a symbol of my hope and readiness.

