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Lutheran church elects first female bishop in Arizona

Lauren Castle, Arizona Republic Published 6:00 a.m. MT Sept. 15, 2018



A rise in female leadership can be seen across the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America including the Grand Canyon Synod, which recently installed its first female bishop.

The move makes Bishop Deborah Hutterer one of 17 female bishops in the church, including Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton.

The 63-year-old's journey to become the synod's sixth bishop in its history didn't come without surprises. However, Hutterer said she is excited about the new position and helping to lead the synod to continue its mission of service.

"I'm excited about the number of people who want to see something new and who are willing to engage in conversations and actions that can let God do something through us," she told The Arizona Republic.

Deciphering the call

Growing up in St. Paul, Minnesota, Hutterer fell in love with her neighborhood church. When her parents could not attend services, she would walk to church by herself.

"I really got to understand this sense of inclusivity and hospitality, and this is what Jesus is about," she said.

In junior high, she talked with her pastor about her call to ministry. However, she did not receive the response she was hoping for.

"He said, 'Oh, women, aren't ordained. You should go be a school teacher or a social worker,'" she recalled.

When she was in her 30s, Hutterer worked for a church in Baldwin, Wisconsin as a parish life coordinator. One day, the pastors suggested she attend seminary due to her curiosity about faith.

She did not have an undergraduate degree, so Hutterer became a student and commuted to Augsburg University in Minneapolis every weekend while raising her children and working full-time.

"I think it was an internal sense of understanding and call, but certainly an external sense of call from people around me saying, 'You need to be a pastor,'" she said.

Hutterer served as a pastor at St. Paul Lutheran Church in Pontiac, Illinois before becoming the executive director of Faith in the City in Minneapolis.

Hutterer was serving as the chief development officer for Lutheran Social Services of the Southwest in Arizona when she was elected bishop.

From pastor to bishop



The Grand Canyon Synod annually holds an assembly to address business matters. About 40 names were brought forward to be bishop at this year's assembly at Resurrection Lutheran Church in Oro Valley. After the fifth ballot, Hutterer was elected with 145 votes.

The bishop said she felt terrified and excited when hearing the results. She was installed on Sept. 8 at Shepherd of the valley Lutheran Church in Phoenix.

Hutterer said she is not surprised more women are becoming bishops.

"I think about how women have always been leaders in the church and how grateful I am for women who led the way and how grateful I am for the people who recognized that it's not about being female or male, it's about being a leader," she told The Republic.

About 27 percent of Evangelical Lutheran Church clergy were women in 2017, according to the denomination.

500 years after Martin Luther

Martin Luther helped start what is known as the Protestant Reformation on Oct. 31, 1517 by sharing his disagreements, the "Ninety-Five Theses," with the beliefs of the Catholic Church.

Even though Luther's act was almost 501 years ago, Hutterer said the Reformation is still relevant today and can help bring reform.

"Martin Luther never really wanted to break away from the church," she said. "He wanted the church to change and I think that is exactly what we are called to do today."

She said Luther had faith conversations with regular people outside of the clergy.

"We can look at the ways things are and ask how they could be different," Hutterer said.

Safety in the church

With accusations surrounding child abuse and #MeToo within religious communities continuing to come to light, churches across the country are looking into ways to create safe places.

Hutterer said the Evangelical Lutheran Church put policies into place regarding sexual misconduct since its founding in 1988 to protect congregants.

"When people make accusations, we take them seriously and follow up and actually ask a pastor to remove him or herself," she said.

Churches are asked to have a written policy statement on sexual misconduct. Staff and volunteers go through mandatory training. The denomination encourages allegations of child abuse to be reported to law enforcement and sexual misconduct should be reported to church leaders.

"We applaud any church that puts any kind of safeguards in place, not only for children but for all people," she said.

Diversity and community



The Grand Canyon Synod represents Arizona, and parts of Nevada and Utah. It is one of 65 synods in the country.

For the bishop, the synod is unique.

"Diversity of people, diversity of language and diversity of geography," Hutterer explained.

In the synod, is the Navajo Evangelical Lutheran Mission. The Rock Point, Arizona mission was created by missionaries more than 50 years ago to serve the Navajo Nation. A charter school, private kindergarten, health clinic and a church operate on the mission's campus.

Churches in Las Vegas are finding ways to attract more people, such as providing meals during the week, according to Hutterer.

The bishop said recently a retired teacher from Yuma became an ordained minister.

More than 3.5 million baptized members were in the Evangelical Lutheran Church as of December 2016.

According to a 2014 Pew Research Center study, 49 percent of Protestants in the U.S. attend religious services at least once a week.

Hutterer said a change in the culture is one of the many reasons for the drop in attendance.

"People are more affluent, so they are more mobile," she said. "It's easier to go some place for a long weekend or travel and do something else."

The Pew Research Center study found younger Americans were less likely to attend religious services than older generations. The study said 27 percent of older Millennials and 28 percent of younger Millennials attended services at least once a week.

The bishop said younger people are finding more ways to connect and the church is only one of the options.

She said that people never stop having a yearning for community and finding ways to express the need may be different for each person.

Churches and religious organizations in Arizona have found unique ways to reach young adults and their surrounding communities. The Grand Canyon Synod is no different.

The synod hosts a gathering for adults ages 18-30 on a regular basis. Also, children attend a national youth gathering each year.

"Those are opportunities for them to gather and see that they are not alone," Hutterer said.

She said she encourages people who have felt hurt by the church to be open to visiting.

"There's a lot of people that have been disillusioned by the church or feel like the church has let them down," the bishop said. "And I understand that it is a real feeling. But it's people who have let them down and not God."