

North Carolina Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Historical Interview Questions
Of those who have gone into ministry.

Beverly Jane Dennis Alexander

BD: October 15, 1953, Columbia, Richland County, South Carolina

Parents: Robert Zack Dennis and Helen Balentine Dennis

Married: Joseph A. Alexander, November 1, 1981, Divorced, 1985

Undergraduate degree: B. S. in Biology, University of South Carolina, 1975

Masters degree in Biology University of South Carolina, 1977

M.Div. Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary, 1981

Ordained: SC Synod, May 24, 1981.

Home Congregation: Mount Tabor Lutheran Church, West Columbia, South Carolina

Calls: St. Paul's, Columbia, SC. 1981-1985. Campus Pastor for North Carolina State University, Raleigh, based at Holy Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church, Raleigh, 1985 to present (added campuses include Meredith, Peace)

Served on the Board of Campus Ministry at U. So. Sc. Carolina.

Global mission committee, NC Synod. Ex-officio member of the NC synod campus ministry committee.

After first pursuing a career in marine biology, how did you experience the call for ordained ministry?

Our family was very active in Mt. Tabor, and so church has always been an important part of my life. Even as a child, I would come home from church and I would "play Church" setting up an altar, give sermons etc.. At that time there would have been no opportunity for me to ever go into ordained ministry. However, many folks from Mt. Tabor had gone into the ordained ministry. The whole experience of Mt. Tabor was based on the biblical concept of God's grace, freely given to God's children. I started at the University of South Carolina and became active in the campus ministry there. The campus pastor was the Rev. Robert Dasher who became my mentor. Both of my older brothers were also active in campus ministry while attending school at University of South Carolina. In my senior year, I experienced a stronger sense of the call to ordained

ministry. My parents were concerned about me going into seminary and into the ordained ministry. They were aware of the problems women were facing who followed the call and they didn't want me to be exposed to those disappointments. There were few parishes where a woman could receive a call as pastor. At that time the church required at least 3 years of parish ministry prior to being considered for any specialized ministry such as campus ministry.

I talked with Pastor Dasher, who reacted very positively and encouraged me to truly consider going to seminary. The Lutheran Church in America started ordaining women in 1970 so there were some women already enrolled in the M. Div. track at Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary. Pastor Dasher took me over to the seminary to talk with them. What they described was a very tough road. They were trail blazers, the first ones to travel down this path. I was put off by their descriptions, wondering if I could or wanted to travel that path. I had heard that one of the first women to be ordained in the LCA had received death threats. In the meantime, I received a scholarship to go to graduate school to work on a master's degree in Biology. My major professor was Dr. John Mark Dean. I decided to continue on in graduate school, hoping this call to ordained ministry would "go away." Half way through the program the call did not go away and I realized that I could not say "no" and at least I should try. I did not want to wake up 20 years later and say, I could have been a pastor. All of this time I continued to talk with Pastor Dasher. I also talked with Dr. Dean who encouraged me to follow my calling. During this time many of my graduate school classmates would seek me out to share their struggles, seek support and guidance. They too encouraged me to pursue seminary after finishing my master's degree. In the second year of the program, spring semester I became more intentional and went over to the seminary and talked with Dr. H. George Anderson, president of the seminary. He too was very encouraging. I also talked with Dr. James Aull, the assistant to Dr. Anderson at the seminary. Dr. Aull served on the board of Campus Ministry so we knew each other through that organization. He also was very encouraging that I should enter the seminary program.

During this time my pastor, The Rev. Charles Easley at Mt. Tabor, also encouraged me to enter the seminary. Dr. Anderson understood I was a grad student with few financial resources and he said, I should not let the cost of seminary stand in the way of responding to a call. He would help

me find a way. So I received my master's degree that summer of 1977 and began summer Greek in July with Dr. John Bedenbaugh. Each year new doors opened to me and I finished the program and was ordained in 1981, becoming the first woman to be ordained in the South Carolina Synod.

When I began seminary in 1977, there were 4 women in my class. Three of us graduated from seminary, received calls and continue in ministry to this day. I found the seminary faculty to be supportive of the women enrolled in the M. Div. program. This is high praise for an all male faculty, many of whom had been teaching an all male student body before that time. During the summer of 1978 I was introduced to parish life as a pastor, where I was called on to preach, visit the sick, assist with worship and teach among other parish responsibilities with the Rev. James Addy, pastor of St. Andrew's Lutheran Church, Charleston, SC. Pastor Addy was a very accepting of women in ministry and me personally. My internship was at Christ the King, Gary, NC with The Rev. Dr. John Nagle. He too was very accepting of women in ministry. It was a great place to intern and Pastor Nagle was a good supervising pastor and mentor. From him I experienced consistent, scripturally based preaching. He connected with people, through preaching, pastoral care and teaching.

I served as assistant pastor at St. Paul Lutheran Church, Columbia, SC with the Rev. Ralph Wallace, from 1981 to 1985. Since 1985 brought about some endings, a new beginning appeared.

What led you to become a campus pastor?

The experience in campus ministry while as a student at the University of South Carolina with Pastor Dasher helped me to see its importance in the life of students. I also love being close to the academic world and to the dynamic community that surrounds the arena of higher learning. When I received the call to campus ministry to work in Raleigh I was ready to move and begin a new chapter in my life.

What are your perspectives on being one of the first women to become a pastor?

When I look back and see where we were and where we are now, we

have come a long way. But we still have a long way to go. There are still many congregations who to this day would not consider a woman's academic preparation, parish skills etc, before considering what gender she is. However, more women have come into the ministry and the enrollment in seminary is made up of 50% women now. For me, even from the beginning in seminary, the road through ministry has been a positive one. I have found more people throughout the ELCA who are welcoming of women in ordained ministry than I could have ever imagined 30 years ago.

Perspectives on Campus Ministry in North Carolina over the past 25 years.

North Carolina Synod is one of the most supportive synods with regard to campus ministry, both financially as well as understanding what the value of campus ministry is to the work of the church at large.

What are some of the highlights you have experienced in Campus Ministry in Raleigh?

I continue to enjoy watching students grow in faith and life from their first days as freshmen to graduation time. I appreciate traveling the path with the students who are discerning the call to ordained ministry.

Over your career as a pastor, what specific goals have you set for yourself, and have you been able to achieve them?

To always look upon the people of God with compassion . Have I achieved that? Yes and no. To grow in my own faith, to dig deep into it, stretch it. That is something that is ongoing.

What advice would you share with future church leaders of synod?

Be open to the Spirit, even if you are not sure where She is leading you.

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