

## Interview with Reverend Phyllis Zillhart and Laura Hawkins

### Monday, June 9, 2025

LH: OK. Perfect. So, I have found several both news articles and then some profiles on like Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries websites and so forth, which are really great at telling a part of your story and what I'm writing is not gonna be super long either, but these are sort of biographies, so I was wondering if you could tell me like when and where you were born and a little bit maybe about your childhood

PZ: Sure, so I was born, my birthdate is September 9, 1957. In Canby, Minnesota, which is a small rural town close to South Dakota. So, Prairie cornfield soy beans. We lived in town, so that was different than country, but even so and both sides of grandparents were on the farm. So, a lot of roots in, you know, a pretty rural context. But it was one of those towns where like the Lutheran Church where I was a member was at that time, it was the baby boom all that, so it was a very thriving large Lutheran Church. So, the population of the town was like 2,000 but the church had like you know over 1,000 people just drawing from the area so you know it was just one of those where it was very vibrant. And a lot... and so kind of like you know church and school. That was pretty much what was what was going on, you know? Um, I wasn't getting into. I wasn't you know drinking and partying. So, I'm sure there were other things going on but for me, those were the main things that were going on.

So, my father side of the family, you know they were sort of the get your kids baptized, you get them confirmed, you have you know your weddings at church, you have your funerals at church, and maybe you go to church on Easter and Christmas. And you know it was kind of that sort of thing for my dad's side. And I think he would've said (both of my parents are deceased, but I think he would've said) you know it's not that I don't believe in God but it just wasn't a big thing for him. You know he would go to church once in a while. And he was a man that was much more comfortable in overalls than, you know, a shirt and tie. And so he just was always squirmy inside and so he just felt like he just never, you know, that wasn't church was not where he was, uh, he loved the outdoors and you know all of that. I think he really had an affinity to nature. So that really wasn't his side of things and he was not academic at all. So, he actually only got through the eighth grade in terms of schooling and I think he had some dyslexia too so that might've contributed. But I think it also was you just got to a certain point and then you worked on the farm and that's what you did and you know it wasn't that was education, higher education it was not a value for his family.

And my mother's side, her family came from that Norwegian Lutheran side that became ALC that became ELCA and they were very involved. So, my mother's parents were part of founding this congregation in this even smaller town in southwestern Minnesota. And so you know on the church council, good friends with the pastor, always teaching Sunday school. So, when we would stay on the farm as kids, (I have three brothers). When we'd stay on the farm with them during the summer sometimes, you know, it would be grandpa would have devotions at the at the breakfast table, and would read from the Bible, and say these long prayer prayers when as a kid you're like, "Really? Really? Here we go." But now I

## Interview with Reverend Phyllis Zillhart and Laura Hawkins

### Monday, June 9, 2025

look back now, and you know that was very meaningful. And he were just, you know, thank God for the night sleep and the peace and the rest, and it was very rooted in their daily lives. You know it really wasn't praying for the wide world very much, but it really was just kind of that relational as they were living their lives.

So my mother was very... so when I grew up, church was you know very important to me. So [I] always attended school Sunday school, loved going to church, all that kind of stuff. And, church I think was also part of solace for me. I think it was, um, I wouldn't have identified it back then, but I think my dad had some anxiety stuff and drinking was I think part of him just feeling more calm but also obviously it became an issue where it was also taking him away from family. So, I think my dad was an alcoholic when I was growing up. I wouldn't have identified it that way then, and he actually went into a treatment program and became sober when I was in seminary actually. So you know there was an absence with him in a way. And my mom you know her faith was very important to her, but it also was kind of that, you know, "don't drink, don't smoke, don't dance, don't..." you know, it was it was pretty moralistic. I think she also had just some tendencies to just be kind of, I don't know, controlling in and just not easily emotionally available. So, the church became that place for me where I think. Oh well, also I think my mother also probably has some anxiety disorder stuff going on because the home where I grew up was very chaotic. it was, I don't know if you call it a trash house, but it was just it was unkempt. It was just not a good clean safe place to be, and so I think the church, the house of God, really became a sanctuary to me, almost kind of literally there for a while in my childhood. And through the church I think I also was getting validation for some leadership qualities. And I played piano so I could accompany different things. So, you know, all of those things became part of me feeling more confident, more grounded in the world.

And sexuality was just one of those where you know, I can look back and see you know signs that you know there was something going on early in my life where I didn't feel the attraction to boys. I wanted to grow up to be a boy when I was little. But you know again it was a very limited social world, and I no role models for what would be something different than kind of growing up to be a housewife and mother. And so, I think I just kind of needed to be away from that environment. I knew something in me, I did not want to be a housewife. and mother. I knew that. That role that looks very narrow to me. I do also remember, Laura, that in vacation Bible school when I was like I don't know six years old, or something young, we went around and teacher was like, "What do you wanna do when you grow up? What do you wanna do?" And I said, well, I wanted to be a pastor. Well, this was way before Lutheran were dating women as ministers and she said, "Well girls can't be pastors, but you could be a parish secretary. That's almost the same." And I thought, "eh, parish secretaries probably do a heck of a lot, but that's not the same thing at all." And I just somehow knew that, well it didn't dissuade me. I just thought well I don't know, I probably will and I don't know why I felt that. It wasn't that there weren't pastors in my family. There was, I mean nobody had gone on a higher education. So you know, I think

## Interview with Reverend Phyllis Zillhart and Laura Hawkins

### Monday, June 9, 2025

there was a calling early on somehow and there were times when I felt like I kind of resisted that, but it always felt like there was something that compelled me back to that calling.

So then, when I kind of came into my own sexuality, which first was very intellectual. You know it was just trying to figure out, "who am I?" And you know, sort of tried dating young men, but just never felt all that comfortable and always felt like you always kept the back door open. You know that kind of, um, couldn't really be fully present. And so, I kinda came out intellectually in seminary. So, I was already in seminary. I had these wild crushes on women in college you know, but again didn't think much of it you know. And so, then it became this very difficult... By that time the policy had come out... there was some statement, some sexuality statement that if you were gonna be ordained that you were supposed to sign onto. And so, it just became this the dilemma where you had to figure out what would you choose? Would you choose your sexuality or would you choose your spirituality? And who are you as a person and what's basic to who you are? And just intrinsic to who you are? And I couldn't answer because obviously both are intrinsic to who we are in the mystery of our personhood.

And so I kind of was just Confused for a while and actually took a year off seminary because I just thought, "I don't know what I'm doing here. I don't know what I should be doing." And nothing resolved in that year, so I thought I was about to go on my internship, so I thought, "I better just go on my internship. OK." And so came back, and my internship went well, and I came back and I thought, "well I think I'll just keep going here." And that was when Ruth Frost and I started to become friends and so then that took Several years for that to kind of become a real relationship. And I ended up taking an extra senior year of seminary, so I kind of I really didn't know what I wanted to do, and was kind of peddling for time. And it was during that that second senior year that Ruth and I got together. And I hadn't been with a woman before, and so you know, and I didn't really know who I was and I couldn't commit to what that meant, and it would mean losing what was becoming my career and all this time and energy and money that had gone into this education and feeling this calling from when I was six years old or whatever. But I also just knew that this was true to who we were, and I just felt like in the Wizard of Oz when you open the door and suddenly you know it's not sepia anymore. It's in color and you didn't even realize that, "Oh I was living in a sepia world. I wasn't fully embodied. I wasn't being fully true to myself." And so that integration was huge for me. Very scary. Unsettling, I didn't know what to do with it, but very liberating and really became such a powerful way to be in the world.

The difficulty was that I was still in seminary, so I had to be very closeted because Luther Seminary would've been a place that would've wiped you out in a moment if they if it had come out. Very homophobic at the time. And so, it was this having to be closeted and yet feeling integrated, and so it was just like this totally weird world. After I graduated from seminary, I got a call as an interim pastor, and at that time an interim pastor you did not need to be ordained. You could get authorized from the bishop for sacramental ministry,

## Interview with Reverend Phyllis Zillhart and Laura Hawkins

### Monday, June 9, 2025

but it wasn't an ordained position. I did that for almost a year, so it was kind of like I had a year of being a closeted pastor. And at that time, then Ruth had left ministry behind and was working at Pride Institute, which was the first inpatient treatment center for LGBTQ people at that time. So, she was in this amazing place in her work life, and I was in this totally closeted world. And so at that point, then I just thought you know this is not workable. I need let this go. This is just not good.

And so I approach my bishop and talked to him, which was Bishop Lowell Erdahl at the time. And actually Lowell Erdahl had been close personal friends with Ruth's dad Gerhard Frost, who was a long time seminary professor. So he knew Ruth very well. He'd known Ruth for years. And so coming out to Lowell in that meeting and telling him you know, "I'm in this relationship it's pretty new, but I really do think this is a long-term committed relationship, and I just can't be sabotaging it by being closeted as a pastor, and also I cannot fully be a pastor, proclaiming a ministry, a gospel of grace and radical love and acceptance, when I'm not able to experience that. How can I tell the truth when I can't live the truth?" And he said, "I am sorry you told me this because now I'm going to have to take you off the roster, and I've been hearing good things about your ministry, and I actually had a full-time call in mind for you. That was going to come through, probably, but now I have to remove you from the roster." So that happened.

And you know I didn't have a plan. I didn't have a Plan B. In college, I had majored in English and minored in religion and classics. So, you know, I was very good at interpreting Greek, but people don't really need a lot of ancient Greek interpreted. So, it was a tough time to try to figure out what did that mean career wise. [I had] a bunch of temporary jobs, and trying to do this and trying to do that, and I just needed... I didn't know what I wanted to do. I just was like, "Should I go back to school? Should I just go to [United Church of Christ]? What should I?" I didn't know what to do. And at that time Ruth was doing very well with her work at Pride Institute and all that. So, it was just like, ok.

And then five years into that, we'd been together five years, that's when we got the invitation to apply for the position at Saint Francis Lutheran Church in San Francisco. Our friend Anita Hill had seen an ad in The Lutheran magazine that was advertising this position and she made a copy of it and mailed it to us. So, we actually got this invitation in the mail. And we just thought, "Well, this sounds like it could be us." It was looking for a lesbian who was able to be open and out, but also publicly identified, but who either was already ordained or had the qualifications for it. And we both, Ruth and I, had been certified and all of that in and up and ready for call and then we withdrew from... she withdrew from the process, and then I was taken off the roster. So, we qualified for what they were looking for, and so then you probably know the rest of that story. So that was pretty pretty amazing too. So that's kind of how that all that, all spilled out.

## Interview with Reverend Phyllis Zillhart and Laura Hawkins

### Monday, June 9, 2025

I probably told you a lot more than you were looking for there, but that's kind of called that whole story fits together. And it was, it was a big stretch for my parents. Let's just say, you know, but they never rejected me. I don't know that they ever really understood me, and had a hard time fully affirming, but they never rejected. And given the circumstances that they were living in, that was a pretty big thing.

And then just quick, and then I need I need to head out here in a little bit, and then maybe less arrange another time to talk with Ruth, but we, in San Francisco, met this gay male a couple. We ended up becoming close friends and then talked about, "Would we ever want to have a child together?" And so, we ended up finally that we decided we did. So, I am our daughter's biological mother, but Ruth is also a mom, and then one of them is the biological dad but they're also both involved. And so, when we were in San Francisco our daughter would go kind of back-and-forth between those two homes. And then when we moved to Minnesota, that was tough for her to be away from them. So, this poor kid. We were hoping to have two kids and only ended up having one. So, this poor kid was with four parents, it just doesn't quite seem fair. And now she's partnered, and we have one grandson, so that's pretty awesome too.

LH: That's amazing

PZ: Yeah, he's eight years old. He's very fun.

LH: Cool, and are they in Minnesota so you can see them frequently?

PZ: They are in the Twin Cities as well, so yes, that is wonderful

LH: That's great. So let me know when you need to go, and we can talk another time. But when you came out to the bishop, did you feel like his hands were just tied? Were you angry that he didn't fight for you more?

PZ: Well, like it to be an interesting story because he was so conflicted because he had been someone who you knew he was basically supportive for gay lesbian people, but obviously there was a limit to what he could and would do. But he was becoming more and more affirming. You know he even gave some examples that sort of talked about what you just said like he felt like his hands were tied. And I don't think I was expecting him to do other than what he did, but it was very disappointing and hurtful. I don't know if I was so angry cause I think I kind of thought it was gonna go that way, but I also you know, didn't know what I was gonna do. So, part it was just my own sense of lostness with it. It would be different if I was like well I'm leaving this and now I'm doing that. And so many years later... so this all happened in 19... when did I come out to him...85 maybe? Maybe early 86? I can't remember. So, Ruth and I got together in the fall of 84, and we had a commitment ceremony in 86, and it was in between those two times. So, moving forward

## Interview with Reverend Phyllis Zillhart and Laura Hawkins

### Monday, June 9, 2025

many years in, well I think it was just in 2000, when Anita Hill was ordained. Anita Hill was from the Twin Cities and was very well known here. She'd been this huge advocate for all of these years, and she finally went to seminary, and she'd kind of been a lay minister for a long time, but finally went to seminary and was being extra extraordinarily ordained through her congregation, Saint Paul Reformation Lutheran Church in Saint Paul. And by that time, Lowell Ehrdal had retired. And so for Anita's coordination, so that was 10 years after Ruth and Jeff and I were ordained, Bishop Egertson, Paul Egertson, was present and participating in the ordination. And Bishop Erdahl had retired by that time, but he participated in it actively as well. So that you know his evolution... So, we came from California to be part of Anita's ordination, and so here we were vested and waiting to get going, and he came up to me. And he just he gave me a personal apology. And he said, "I'm so sorry." He said, "I just, at that time, I just was not ready." And I said, "Oh, I totally understand. We all needed the process. You know, we all needed to walk the journey." And he just gave me this big hug. And you know, it was very healing. I didn't feel like I was hanging onto it, but boy when you get that release and that direct healing, it was very powerful. And I think it was good for him as well. You could tell that that had kind of hung over him also. So, you know, we don't get to know. It's so important not to pigeonhole people, even people who oppose us in certain things, to just know God isn't finished with any of us yet. You know, we are all works in progress. And grace, grace just keeps whittling away. God is patient. So, yeah, so that was a beautiful part of that strange story

LH: Wow, that's that is really lovely that, not only did he come around, but he let you know.

PZ: Yeah, exactly. Yeah. Yeah. How important it is. That second part, isn't it?

LH: Yes OK, so I understand... there's a lot of information... I have a lot of information. Is there anything you wanna tell me about your time in San Francisco? Because that was sort of AIDS epidemic timeframe, I believe and yeah

PZ: You know, I think yeah we can talk about this more with Ruth present, too so why don't we do that. But just say you know I don't, I don't think we could've come into a more justice minded, loving gracious community than Saint Francis. And you know and they were on a journey too. You know we were all evolving as we went, but, boy, just the open arms and when the epidemic came it was so strong, you know they really became a Haven for families to come. You know places that probably had just had a lot of condemnation or secrecy and suddenly you could just be open and accepted, and you know I think they almost were a haven that way, you know, for many people. And then for people who were on a coming out journey, you know, we were kind of that place where people would come in process and have a different way of looking at things in different role model. And then just for the men who we're young and dying, you know for them to be so open and trusting and to you know, I mean I was 32 when I was ordained and didn't... I don't know, what did I know? I don't know, but I look back and I think, "Wow, what a gift of faith that they gave to

## Interview with Reverend Phyllis Zillhart and Laura Hawkins

### Monday, June 9, 2025

trust that I could accompany them. I've been doing hospice ministry now for the last almost 20 years of my life, 15 years at Saint Francis, and it's been about 20 years now with hospice, and I think some of those young men who were dying, who trusted me early on, it feels like in a way they planted the seeds. They opened the door for this part of my ministry, to almost accompanying me in a way you know.

So it feels like it feels like a real honor. I guess that's what I'm trying to say. I felt I feel very honored for that trust that they gave, and I think gave me a real grounding in in a ministry around accepting mortality

LH: Yeah, I can understand that they had faith in you and a really difficult time in their lives

PZ: Exactly.