

**Women's Leadership Lunch – "Ethnicity in Our Community"**  
**April 6, 2017**

**REV. MINNA BOTHWELL**

I was born and raised in a small Iowa town. I currently live in Windsor Heights with my husband Nat. I have been serving as solo pastor at Capitol Hill Lutheran Church for 2 years and 8 months.



I want to take you back to my beginnings to set some context for our conversation. My first experience of diversity happened at a very young age because my maternal grandmother and next door neighbor emigrated from Germany in the 1950s and we spent, many summers with relatives from Germany who would fly here to visit us. So I grew up knowing that there was more than just our small town experience in the world. A lot of people I grew up with did not have that, so I want to share a couple of stories from my youth that have deeply impacted the way I understand diversity.

The town I grew up in numbered about 350 and was all white, either Lutheran or Catholic and mostly farmers. My middle school and high school had very little diversity. My class had one young black man and two Latina women out of 175 students.

The black student had a younger sister and they were the only African Americans I knew growing up. And what I remember most about my childhood in these schools is the way that anyone or anything different was considered bad.

Victor was not only black but also Jewish which meant that he and his family were not welcome. Our schools only celebrated Christian holidays so he and his sister were pulled from school to celebrate their Jewish holidays at home. On the major Christian holidays that they did not want to participate in they also stayed home. When they were gone people took note and would make sure to shame them when they returned. They also had some different culture norms from the Western European descendent students. They spoke a little different and acted a little different and they were reminded that they would never be what everyone else could be. This went on for several years until the family decided that the schools and town were not a safe place for their kids to live or be educated. And so they moved but not before people in the area made them feel less than all of us.

I do not know where Victor's sister is today but I know that Victor is serving 25 years on an "intent to murder" charge. I often ask myself, how much influence did our community have on him. Always telling him he was less-than, worthless and never going to amount to anything. How much of that became part of who he is and the crime he committed? I do think we were all to blame.

The two Latina students were also treated as outsiders. They were not invited to parties or chosen for certain teams and they did not make the cheerleading squad. They basically had each other. They were reminded every day that their hair, skin and culture were different from all the other females. I remember the day I found out that Crystal had ovarian cancer. She was struggling through high school, being a different race and suffering alone with ovarian cancer. And no one cared. The day she had to have her head shaved for chemotherapy she was mocked and went home crying. I have never forgotten her look of abandonment that we caused. If she had been white and had a well-known name, we would have visited her, sent her flowers and cards, brought her family meals and held her when she cried. But we didn't, only because she was Latina.

These two students were born in America, spoke English and were really good students but they were a different race. Watching what happened to them made me realize that it did not have to be that way. It greatly disturbed my soul at a young age and it has impacted the way I speak, I write and I think, and the way I advocate. Every single person deserves freedom, joy and love. I believe God desires that more than anyone else.

Diversity is a gift from God and so often we take it for granted or we try to assimilate it to who we are instead of learning to embrace it and grow with it. These are the same struggles of the disciples and the people we read about in the New Testament. Jesus' response was always the same to them as it is to us, "love your neighbor."

Since high school I have had many opportunities to work alongside people of different races, religions and ethnicities in my time at Iowa State University, as chaplain in Miami, Florida, as an intern pastor serving a Lutheran church and Nuer community in Minnesota and as a volunteer to Haiti seven times. My identity and understanding of the human condition have been challenged and shaped over and over again and I feel incredibly blessed because of this.

Which brings me to 2014 when I was called to Capitol Hill Lutheran Church which is a congregation that claims and lifts up diversity. It is truly a privilege to walk the path of faith together.

Capitol Hill Lutheran has members who were born on five different continents. On any given Sunday you can hear 10 languages being spoken. Our members live throughout the metro area. We try really hard to celebrate our cultural and ethnic diversity in all that we do. It doesn't always look the way we expect or want it to but we believe it is a genuine expression of the body of Christ.

Capitol Hill Lutheran is the result of a merger of immigrant churches: Central Lutheran (Norwegian) and First Lutheran (Swedish). These congregations were safe havens for Latvians and Germans in the 1950s, Vietnamese refugees in the 1970s, South Sudanese in the 1990s and

Eritrea in 2016. Our church has assisted in providing resettlement services to refugees of these and other countries by assisting with housing, education, food, and clothing for families in need and a safe place to worship.

Since the merger in 2002, Capitol Hill has continued to be a place for these refugees to worship and participate as full members of the congregation. One of the ways that we do this is in partnership with Lutheran Services of Iowa to offer weekly English language classes to refugees and immigrants for free. We also partner with Iowa Legal Aid to provide conversation and information on tax preparation. We have a free clothing closet that is open to the community twice a week. We are an ecumenical partner for the Urban Bicycle food ministry that takes food by way of bicycle to homeless camps and shelters around the metro area. Last week the Des Moines University Muslim Association helped us prepare food that was delivered.

Today we have worship in four different languages; Vietnamese, Nuer, Kunama and English. Every member is invited to our many activities. There are many opportunities for the different cultures to celebrate the way they feel called. Sometimes that looks very different than what the Norwegians and Swedes may have had in mind and hearts when welcoming others. This means that our hearts and minds have been opened by the stories and activities that diversity has brought to us.

We have lay ministers, Gideon, Mikelle and Than, who lead different language services each month. They are also worship assistants at the English services, so the whole congregation knows them as leaders.

Our potlucks are amazing! But more than that, our congregation has a deeper sense of the human condition and the God that is present in the midst of all life and death. The stories these members share with us about God and their faith journeys shape how we see and experience God's people.

I do not have the different nationalities memorized but today our active members come from Eritrea, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Senegal, India (Malayalm people), Mexico, El Salvador, Germany, Latvia, Romania and Vietnam. We have learned a few lessons from all of them.

Whether we realize it or not, we have certain expectations and those are not always in line with God's or even necessary. So our council is not diverse because our South Sudanese and Vietnamese do not find sitting through two hour meetings about issues they don't see or have or understand being life giving. It is not in their cultures. Their churches have survived centuries without it. So we have learned to be okay with that. We have learned that God does not desire us to assimilate and it is alright to have a council that doesn't physically represent the whole congregation. The important thing is that we are in conversation with each other at all times.

Funerals for our South Sudanese are very physical and our Nuer members grieve physically. There will be wailing, people throwing themselves onto the casket and the graveside service will include 10 additional hymns that were not planned. At least one person will faint. We have learned that allowing yourself to grieve publicly with others is a blessing. We have hidden our emotions for so long as a culture and our Sudanese are teaching us that it is okay to grieve.

Most of our Vietnamese do not speak English. They have services three times a month in Vietnamese and join the English service once a month. Even though they cannot follow along orally they are still able to worship and participate with each other. Language is far less important than these brothers and sisters having the freedom and space to be with others to love and worship together.

We have a group that comes from India who are the Malayalam tribe. They gather several times a year for special events, including belly dancing. The day I learned that their marriages were still arranged I was in shock and fairly upset. I have learned that if they find arranged marriages life giving, it is ok to accept one another and understand that every culture has different practices. Some we may not agree with but we can still share a table.

My favorite story of a lesson learned is when our South Sudanese were fairly new to the country. They hosted a large celebration at our church and part of it included sacrificing a live goat in our kitchen. We learned that it is okay to say no, that does not work for us, but you are welcome to celebrate in any other way you would like.

Our life together is wonderfully diverse and that diversity is the very image of God. It is exciting and new every single week and messy and imperfect every single week. We do not want it any other way. We will continue to seek to understand others and to meet others where they are because it is what Christ has done for all of us. We will continue to work on seeing all people, regardless of race, ethnicity and religion as children of God. We will also work to remind one another that the "American Way" is not the only way. When we allow ourselves to be open, we truly gain a richer, deeper, more faithful understanding of the living Jesus Christ and the genuine kingdom of God. One is which all people are loved and forgiven and welcome.