

**Marilyn Stavenger,  
Seminary Professor, Pastor and Advocate/  
Profesora de seminario, pastora y defensora (de las  
causas de justicia)**

**1. Getting to Know You/Aprendiendo a conocer a Marilyn**

Name/Nombre: Marilyn Louise Stavenger  
Career/Carrera: Seminary Professor, Pastor and Advocate/Profesora de seminario, pastora y defensora

A. B Award/A. B. honor: 1999

Color of Hair/Color de pelo: Brown/Marrón

Color of Eyes/Color de ojos: Hazel /Avellano

Brothers or Sisters/Hermanos o hermanas:  
Two brothers/Dos hermanos

Birth Order/Orden de nacimiento en la familia:  
I am the youngest/Soy la menor

Favorite School Subject/Clase favorita:  
English Literature/Literatura inglesa

Hobbies/Pasa tiempos: Reading, hiking and camping, horseback riding, cooking, softball, caring for farm animals, and other outdoor activities, plus band (I played the flute)/Leer, acampar, montar a caballo, cocinar, fútbol, cuidar animales de granja, y otras actividades al aire libre, además de tocar la flauta.

When by myself/Cuando estoy sola:  
I enjoyed exploring the woods, building a campfire, and finding a shaded glen in which to read and



write in my journal./Me gusta explorar la naturaleza, hacer una fogata, y encontrar una cañada sombreada donde leer y escribir en mi diario.

Friends/Amigos y amigas:

Kids in the neighborhood -- mostly boys -- with whom I rode horses, explored the woods, played sports, and played with baby animals, dogs and cats./Niñas y niños en la vecindad-mayormente niños-montábamos a caballos, jugábamos deportes, y jugábamos con animales pequeños, perros y gatos.

I admired/Yo admiro:

My home pastor and his wife: They were my heroes and confidants. But also many of my teachers were really special. And my dad was my best friend./A mi pastor y a su esposa, eran mis héroes y confidentes. También mis maestras eran muy especiales. Y mi papá era mi mejor amigo.

## 2. The Pondering Place<sup>1</sup>

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*There is a Power whose care  
Teaches thy way along that pathless coast—  
The desert and illimitable air—  
Lone wandering, but not lost.*<sup>2</sup>

There was one place in the woods above a creek where a tree had roots growing out at an angle and then it had filled in. It was above a pooled area in a creek. That became my "pulpit." I would go up there and "preach" out loud to the animals and trees in the woods.

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<sup>1</sup> From phone interview with Marilyn Stavenger on January 23, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> From "To a Waterfowl" by William Cullen Bryant. Visit <http://www.bartleby.com/248/81.html>.

What I knew from early on is that I wanted to help people. I wanted to work with people, not with inanimate things. In high school, I thought in terms of medicine, particularly psychiatry. The way the mind works interests me. When I looked at my gifts and talents, my strengths were not in math and science but in English, literature and those sorts of things. It became clear even before I was out of high school that I wanted to be involved in the church.

I could have been the farmer with my dad had I not gone off to college. I had a love and appreciation for the farm and the woods. My dad raised dairy cattle. A neighbor had given me two lambs when I was five. I begged and pleaded, and my dad finally relented and divided his pasture. My fifty-two sheep, along with scholarships, helped put me through college. I have always loved sheep because of the image of the church as a shepherding community.

### 3. *"Whatever else you do, get an education."*

Because of my dad's closeness and his love for nature, the farm and the animals, I sensed in him my spiritual mentor even though he did not go to church.

Neither parent had much formal education but both were wise. I was helping my dad harvest squash and pumpkins on a back part of the farm when a flock of Canadian geese went over. He stopped, put his arm around me and recited "To a Water Fowl." That was a stunning surprise.

It gave me a sense of how really educated my parents were. My dad had only gone to the fifth grade. Both of my brothers had quit school. Dad said to me, "Whatever else you do, get an education. The world can take everything away from you, but until it takes your life it can't take your education." That was a tremendous gift. He died when I was 22.

My mother, who lived to be 95, was a strong woman. She taught me that women should have strength of conviction:

*You can do whatever you want to with your life.  
You decide.  
Don't let anything stop you because you are a  
woman.*

These gifts from my parents have influenced my entire life.

#### 4. A Pastor's Encouragement

I remember the church being open and welcoming to children and letting me take Sunday school attendance and help the superintendent in later elementary years. I loved being a helper in the church.

While she loved and respected her parents, they were the age of her friend's grandparents. In seventh grade, Marilyn bonded with the new, young pastor and his wife who came from Oberlin. She became invested in the church when the pastor started youth groups. "I so looked up to my pastor," she said. "The seeds of being a preacher were planted."

While she did not know any ministers who were women, she responded to her pastor's encouragement to consider the ministry. He asked her to preach the Easter sunrise service. He also took her out of classes as a high school junior to be the church's delegate at a conference meeting.



Immediately after high school, she went to Hiram College to major in religion and psychology. In 1957, she went right on to seminary, having won a full scholarship to Yale Divinity School.

At Yale, there were 125 men and eleven women in her class. Only two women sought ordination. Initially, when she went into ministry, ministry was a man's world, a man's profession in every sense.

My preaching professor said to me, "I have never had a woman in this class. You have to prove to me that a woman can preach because I don't believe that you can. I don't think women project their voice well enough."

I worked hard to overcome this stereotype. I projected my voice, lowered my voice, and made sure I did not drop the words at the ends of my sentences. I got the preaching prize that year.

I also had to be an excellent administrator. I had to understand budgeting and finance. I had to do funerals without crying up there.

## 5. Parish Minister, Park Congregational Church UCC, Toledo, Ohio, 1961-1987

Marilyn went to Toledo directly from seminary. For the next twenty-six years, she was on the ministerial staff at Park Congregational United Church of Christ. For the first seven years, she was an associate for teaching ministry. Then she was in a team ministry for ten years.

"The last nine years I was head of the staff," she said, "but still functioned in a team ministry style. That is what I love doing. I could stay there that long because the church gave sabbaticals for study leaves."

At the completion of her twenty-fifth year of serving at Park, also her 25th anniversary of ordination, the church had a celebration. "This wonderful celebration was not in honor of Marilyn," she said, "but of our unfolding ministry together and how it had grown and changed in that time."

Through those years, she had been concerned that the right time for the church to have her leave might be the wrong time for her. "I realized a few weeks after the celebration that it had been a closure event," she said. "It was clear then that it was right for both of us."

## 6. Advocate

Marilyn Stavenger and Eden Seminary had met earlier. In 1975 while she was serving the Toledo church, the seminary invited her to come on the board of directors, in part to be a mentor of women students.

"What I discovered," she said, "was that women my own age — some had married and had children — were coming back to seminary. They did not see ministry as a male profession. They understood that they were women who were going to be pastors."

At a Women in Ministry meeting about issues of employment in the early 1970s, a member of the Task Force on Women in Church and Society challenged Marilyn.

As the women told their stories around the circle, I heard their anger and rage and pain because they could not get profiles circulated. I sat there getting more and more uncomfortable because I felt myself being judgmental. I

know why you can't get a job. You can't get a job with that kind of anger.

When it was her time to speak, she did not reflect what she was feeling. Instead she told her story, a positive story. "I did not have any trouble," she said, "and I was not having trouble in ministry as a woman." Norman Jackson pointed out that she had male advocacy through it all. He asked, "So when are you going to start being an advocate?"

His words echoed in her head until "I got myself on a Church and Ministry Committee and finally chaired the Ohio Conference Committee to make sure we were getting out women's profiles."

In that position, she also was called to do mock interviews as a woman at a retreat for pulpit committees and to preach and serve communion.

She had first viewed ministry as a male profession. Then she moved into a role of advocacy on behalf of women. "I received an enormous gift from Eden women," she said. "They gave me back an understanding of ministry as a profession for men and women. It did not need to be sexist oriented."

Soon becoming a board member at Eden, she spent a sabbatical semester there to learn more about the seminary. She was their first minister-in-residence. Among her discoveries was that the women preached in a sermon style new to her, talking from their own experience as woman and grounding it in earthy imagery.

## 7. "Professor" Stavenger?

Marilyn had envisioned going to New England to serve a little church as solo pastor with a parsonage next door and a cemetery on the other side and maybe a few acres where she could raise a few sheep. "I was just early fifty. If I served a little church, would I also write or would I stagnate?"

Just then, Eden contacted her. For the last nine years at Park she had supervised seminary interns. Seven among them were from Eden. Would she consider a faculty position in field education?

She declined. She had never imagined herself as a seminary professor. She did not have a doctoral degree.

I kept saying, no. No, the academic community is not the right place for me. No, I have a love affair with the local

congregation. Eugene Wehrli was head of Eden at that time. Gene finally took me to lunch and said, "I have listened to you, but have you prayed about this? It is exactly a person with twenty-six years of experience in a parish that we need."

I went, not certain that I was hearing God's call. It had been even a year or two after I made the decision to be ordained before I could look back and say, yes, God's leading was in that decision.

## 8. Eden Seminary Professor of Field Education and the Practice of Ministry, 1988-2003

At Eden Theological Seminary, Marilyn L. Stavenger married her calling as a pastor with seminary teaching. In 1992, after completing a doctoral dissertation, The Pastoral Office in the United Church of Christ: implications for the practice of ministry, she received a doctorate in ministry from the San Francisco Theological Seminary.

While she felt that her work at Eden had come about by accident, she had practiced already for twenty-six years the integration of scripture and practical ministry. "I want to communicate that there is no better gift to give than to be there for someone when it really counts," she told future pastors.<sup>3</sup> She emphasized the privilege of ministry, "You cross class lines, you are welcome everywhere, and you are trusted, automatically, in the most vulnerable moments of people's lives."<sup>4</sup>

She placed high value on linking classroom learning with field experience. Twice a month, her "Ministry Seminar" students met in small groups with their supervisors and a faculty leader to think theologically about a case study that each student prepared.

The year with her students invited them to understand and begin to learn where the people were first. At that point, they could figure

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<sup>3</sup> Stavenger as quoted in Eden Faculty Bios. Visit <http://www.eden.edu/FACULTY/stavngr/html>.

<sup>4</sup> Stavenger as quoted by Jeannette Bates Cooperman in "A Reflection on the Life and Call of The Reverend Dr. Marilyn Stavenger" upon her retirement from Eden Theological Seminary. Visit <http://www.eden.edu/Publications/.../EdenEvents-Stavenger-Retires.pdf>.

out how to begin their ministry together. Together, they would grow a vision of what the church is supposed to be.

In a Palm Sunday sermon years after his seminary encounter with Dr. Stavenger, Tom Warren spoke about his disappointment at not getting his preferred field education assignment. What could he possibly learn from 4- and 5-year-olds?

"You don't really argue with Marilyn Stavenger," he said, "so off to the church preschool I went." He would soon reflect, "Thank God Marilyn Stavenger knew where I needed to be sitting."<sup>5</sup>

It was not long before it became clear that she was where she belonged. "I thought I would miss the parish work," she said. "Well, I had a couch in my office. I did as much pastoral care with students and their families and faculty colleagues. I made hospital calls. I found out that ministry is ministry wherever I am. I came to love the teaching."

## 9. Another Calling



The dog in the accompanying photo was Jean Thomas' dog. Age thirteen now, Caramel was two when Jean died, Marilyn said. "After Jean's death, I became openly a lesbian in the Eden community. They had known, although I had never publicly said it. They continued now to be open and welcoming."

When she interviewed for the Eden position, she had told the search committee only that she would be sharing her home with a woman who had the upstairs apartment in her Toledo home. Because the faculty included Jean socially, "it made it easy for me to be at Eden after living for so long in the same community."

During the Eden years, Karl Kuhn was one of the students who lived for a year in their three-story house for free room and board in exchange for snow shoveling and yard tasks. Years later, he presented a paper in which he spoke about Marilyn Stavenger. In "Holy Scripture, God's Instruction, and Homosexuality," he talked about how coming to know this professor and her partner influenced his once conservative understanding:

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<sup>5</sup> "Humble Palms, Hubris Palms" offered at Pleasant Hill TN on April 9, 2006. [www.pleasanthillucctn.org/Pastor/4-9-06\\_Sermon.doc](http://www.pleasanthillucctn.org/Pastor/4-9-06_Sermon.doc). Used with permission.

Marilyn and Jean were women of deep integrity and faith, faith that nurtured the faith of others. In my mind, their relationship bore witness to the love, care, mutuality and respect that characterizes the best of our relationships with one another.<sup>6</sup>

Two weeks after arriving at Eden, Marilyn had been distressed upon learning that a senior student was removed from care by her conference because she had a lifetime partner. Marilyn told her, "I've had wonderful years in the ministry living in the closet, living a lie."

What was true is that Jean loved me, but she was not lesbian. She was a widowed grandparent. She became a wonderful life partner for fifteen years.

The graduating seminarian had paid a high cost for her honesty but said she could not continue to avoid acknowledging her partner. She also reminded me that while "there is a cost to coming out, there is a very high price to stay in the closet."

Since then, I have thought about what it meant to feel a lot of my life that I was living a lie. They did not really know me. If they really knew me, would they then want me to be their pastor? Would they care about me as they had? Finally getting out of that burden was a wonderful thing.

I knew in college that I was lesbian. I think I knew it in high school but did not have a name for it. I knew I did not want to marry. I did not have the same interests as my classmates although I dated and did all of the things that were expected of me. I even dated the first several years I was at Toledo.

While the ministry team at Toledo led an adult education course about gays and lesbians, presenting educational material was the extent of what Marilyn did there. At Eden, students began to seek her out. She had the books on her shelf. "Students sensed that my office was safe space," she said. "They began to talk to me about their orientation."

Her day came at a seminary forum of gays and lesbians. It was open to the Eden community.

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<sup>6</sup> Kuhn, pp. 3 and 4. Southwest Association of Wisconsin Conference, January 14, 2006. See "Still Curious?" Used with permission of Karl Kuhn.

Two African American women had raised more than sixty foster children in their thirty years together. When they finished telling their stories, one said, "We have told you all about our lives, but we don't know anything about you. Are any of you gay or lesbian?"

Half a dozen students raised their hands. I put up my hand. I knew in that moment that I had to identify in solidarity with those students. They needed to know that I was there for them and would be.

When the two youngest male faculty members later expressed their appreciation for her courage, they had no idea of what had to be overcome for the long coming-out process in a homophobic culture. She countered, "No, those six students are the ones with courage. I am tenured faculty not far from retirement. They have not been ordained and do not have jobs. I just couldn't let them sit out there alone."

## 10. In Retirement

When Marilyn Stavenger first announced that she would retire in 2003, she wondered who she would be if not the pastor of a church and not a seminary professor. "Now," she said, "I have much more clarity about who I am as a person. Now I want to figure out how to be in retirement, to look for God all over again."

## 11. So What About You?

- ***Where do you go to think or what activity gets you to thinking about important things?***
- Read Genesis 28:16. Throughout Marilyn Stavenger's life, she felt at several decision points "not so certain" that this was where she belonged. Each time, she soon realized that God had been leading her decision.

***Tell about something of importance that you have done about which you were unclear at first but found later that it was what God had in mind for you.***

***How did you think through that decision?***

***How did you manage to take the leap of faith into going ahead?***

***How did you include an awareness of God both in your decision and in your going forth?***

***What clues later told you it was a right choice or wrong choice?***

***How would you answer someone who says, if it worked, God was in charge; if it fell apart, God was absent?***

- Think about how trusting your inner voice and trusting God interplay.

***Write about an experience in trusting yourself.***

***Write about an experience in trusting God.***

***How have you gained courage from such experiences?***

- As a wood carver studies a chunk of wood and begins to carve, the wood begins to reveal what it wants to be.

***How has your life so far been like that of a carver of wood? A chunk of wood?***

- Look up the words "advocate" and "advocacy."

***How have you been an advocate for someone else because you have the knowledge and compassion of personal experience?***

***Talk about how you have felt another person's ability to be an advocate for you because that person understood where you were coming from.***

## 12. Church Family Project

Select one or more project:

- ✓ Ask your pastor if you can shadow him or her for a day to gain an idea of the work of a minister.

- Share what you learned about a parish minister's work with your Sunday school class or youth group.
  - Invite your pastor to join you in the group and talk about the journey of a minister.
- ✓ If you live near a theological seminary, invite a seminary professor to talk with your youth group about
  - The difference between college and seminary
  - What sort of college study is helpful, well-rounded preparation before entering seminary
  - Why the professor chose seminary teaching rather than college teaching or parish ministry.
- ✓ Set a time with your youth group leader to have a youth group discussion about
  - The meaning of the word "phobia."
  - Name as many phobias as you can then show a partial listing of phobias from a search engine study (e.g. [www.phobialist.com](http://www.phobialist.com))
  - Ways to overcome a phobia based upon differences among people.

### 13. Still Curious?

"Ask the Question (booklet) and [www.askthequestion.org](http://www.askthequestion.org) (web) information to those seeking to discern a call to the ministry. 800-537-3394.

Barker, Lance R. and B. Edmon Martin. Multiple Paths to Ministry: New Models for Theological Education. Call 800-537-3394.

"In Care." Preparing for Authorized Ministry in the United Church of Christ. 800-537-3394.

Kuhn, Karl. "Holy Scripture, God's Instruction, and Homosexuality" [www.wcucc.org/Misc%20PDFs/SW%20Association%20Meeting%20Jan%2006--k%20kuhn%20\\_2\\_.pdf](http://www.wcucc.org/Misc%20PDFs/SW%20Association%20Meeting%20Jan%2006--k%20kuhn%20_2_.pdf). January 14, 2006

Pepper, Michal Anne. "Reconciling Journey." Nine-week workbook for Lesbian and Gay Christians who have come to a crossroads in their journey. 800-537-3394.

Tanis, Justin. "Transgendered: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith." A transgendered clergyperson explores identity and the experience of God in the lives of transgendered persons. 800-537-3394.

"A Position of Faith." The story of William (Bill) R. Johnson who on June 2, 1972 became the first openly gay person to be ordained to the Christian ministry. Video. 800-537-3394.

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Dallas (Dee) Brauninger. *Antoinette Brown Women: Finding Voice*, October 2007