

Rev. Judy J. WestLee
April 25, 1941 – March 13, 2025

Micah 6:6-8

“With what shall I come before the LORD
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before God with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?
⁷ Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousand rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”
God has told you, O mortal, what is good,
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice and to love kindness
and to walk humbly with your God?”

Judy Westendorf grew up on a farm near the small southeastern town of Zumbro Falls, MN; she loved animals and was the youngest of the family. While her mom tended to be liberal, Judy remembers attending a conservative country Lutheran Church.

From a one room country school house to graduating from Rochester High School, Judy not only enjoyed the countryside but also enjoyed the diversity of a regional city. After graduation, she was eager to move to the City of Minneapolis and attended the University of Minnesota; graduating in 1962 with a BA degree in editorial journalism and then off to the city of New York.

Judy writes: “I was raised in a church that taught me I had an angry, judging God who was to be feared. I was in my 30’s before I heard I had a God who loved me “warts and all! After a series of events, I turned my life over to that God. I heard God’s call to ministry. All I ever wanted to do was to share in God’s love and walk with God’s people.”

She eventually went off to seminary at Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, choosing Candler largely because her sister lived in Atlanta. She graduated from Candler with a MDIV in 1982.

Judy was ordained a deacon & became a probationary member of the Minnesota Annual Conference in 1981. In 1982, she was appointed to serve as pastor of McGregor, Fleming, and Palisade churches. She was ordained an elder & became a full member of the MN Conference in 1985. In 1986, she was appointed to serve South Haven and Kimball parishes.

As a pastor, Judy was down-to-earth, easily approachable, empathetic, and compassionate. She understood and appreciated the small country churches & the needs of their communities.

She writes: *"After coming to my first appointment, I finally faced my sexual identity. I was 41 years old. I struggled to justify my new sexual identity with my understanding of Scripture and Christian tradition. I came out to my bishop and cabinet. I took a personal vow of celibacy."*

We will never be able to understand the depth of courage it took for Judy to come out to her bishop and the entire Cabinet in 1982, nor will we ever be able to understand the tremendous destructive power of rejection she must have felt when guided to handle her identity by becoming celibate. The feeling of being an "Ugly Duckling" was being formed and it carried significant personal costs to her.

In 1989, Judy found herself without an appointment. She began to attend and actively participate in Wesley United Methodist Church in downtown Minneapolis which had become the first Reconciling UMC in Minnesota. She felt a supportive community of many who were also struggling against homophobia in the church and culture.

Judy was appointed to serve Walker UMC in 1991. While serving there, Walker Church voted to become the second Reconciling Congregation in Minnesota and was deeply involved in discussions with the Bishop and Cabinet about celebrating Covenant Services or Holy Unions. Together, Judy, Rev Michelle Miller and Rev Tim Tennant-Jayne began forming the Minnesota Reconciling Church Network in the basement of Walker Church. In 1993, Judy was then appointed the pastor of Central Park UMC in St. Paul.

She writes: *"And then I met the most remarkable woman, Janet Lee, and we fell in love." They were inseparable or as Judy would say: "We're like two peas in a pod!" Judy joined with her loving partner in a Holy Union celebrated at Spirit of the Lakes United Church of Christ in Minneapolis on June 18th, 1994. Having created a new family, they decided on a new name: using "West from Westendorf and Lee from Janet Lee – they decided to be known as "Westlee". This Union, indeed this marriage, lasted over 30 years until Janet died in 2024. Shortly after her Holy Union, at age 53, Judy went on Leave of Absence and was not appointment to serve a church again. During this time she wrote: "I am now on Leave of Absence. I make my living selling water heaters for Sears. I constantly miss ministry and serving God through serving God's people."*

Judy found renewed purpose and calling in ministries of resistance, justice and reformation. Both Judy and Janet quickly became active with the National Reconciling Ministries Network and Affirmation. Judy served on the National Council of Affirmation from 1994 to 2004, serving at times as the Co-Convener of the council. Using her journalistic skills, she served as the Affirmation Newsletter Co-editor up to 2019 always working with Gary Shephard, her dear friend.

Here in Minnesota, Judy and Janet continued to be active in the Minnesota Reconciling Network and was the site manager for the National Reconciling Convocation held in Minneapolis in 1995 taking care of multiple hospitality needs.

Over the years, both Judy and Janet attended many General Conferences in various supportive roles for Affirmation and the Reconciling Church Network. In 1999, the Reconciling Ministries Network wanted to create a display at the coming 2000 General Conference in Cleveland called The Shower of Stoles. It would receive stoles given by clergy and congregations that had been forced out, excluded, or set aside for being openly gay or supportive of LGBTQ+. Wesley Church gave "a Signature Stole #518" and Judy Westlee gave her stole #519 to the display.

Judy entered the retired clergy relationship in 2003. She and Janet had become actively involved in Prospect Park UMC – the third reconciling congregation in Minnesota. It was no accident that Judy was found forming, supporting, and ungirding the ministries of the first three Reconciling Congregations in Minnesota.

On August 24th, 2024 – just four months after Janet's death, Judy joined a gathering of the Reconciling Congregations in MN at First UMC of the St. Cloud Region to celebrate the liberating decisions of the 2024 Charlotte General Conference which removed all condemnation, bans and restrictions aimed at LGBTQ+ persons & their families. What began as a long night of fear & exclusion with the devastating actions of the 1972 Atlanta General Conference had finally ended 52 years later and Judy was there to share in the joy. Judy was a deeply caring pastor who loved and honored the ministry of the small church. She was a spirit-led activist; persistent, resilient, courageous, honest, dedicated, hardworking, a determined team player, expectant and always hopeful.

A deeply loving partner to Janet, a loyal friend to many, one who loved waffles, dogs and gardens, who had a great sense of humor and dry wit.

She served with the highest integrity, always calling the church she loved to be at its best, and encouraging folks to follow the Christ whose love is unlimited, whose embrace unrestricted and whose grace is freely available to all.

She wasn't comfortable up front, avoided the spotlight, preferring instead to work behind the scenes – wise, unwavering, always providing what was necessary, and encouraging the faith & spirit of the movement over the long haul – never giving up!

In June of 2023, the names, stories & photos of Judy and Janet Westlee were entered into the profiles of the LGBTQ Religious Archives Network so that they will never be forgotten and their stories can be told alongside persons like: Julian Rush, Jeanne Audrey Powers, Tim Tennant-Jayne, Bishop's Talbert & Wheatley, and Glide Memorial Pastor - Cecil Williams.

Judy and Janet we miss you – but for the renewed church you fought so hard to bring about – we are forever grateful! Peace to your memory and God's speed dear friend!

Dennis J. Alexander
3/27/2025