

Meet Rev. Dianna Bell

I do not come alone to Milwaukee Presbytery. I come because my daughter, Kathryn Dianna Bell Craven is the Designated Associate Pastor of Rock Prairie Church, and I come with Dr. Donald L. Bell because he has been my partner in ministry and spouse for 42 years. Donald and I have been retired since 2000 and 2004 and we want to be near our only surviving daughter, her husband, and her soon to be child.

As a single young adult I was starting a career as a symphony musician (French horn), and worshipping in a church with a strong adult teaching ministry. When a music career faded, I started a young adult ministry in my large church in La Jolla (San Diego) and began to sense my leadership skills, my growing excitement in the Old Testament, and a call to seminary. At Princeton Seminary I began by wanting to be an educated lay leader. By the end of my third year I received a strong call for ordination. Since few churches in 1973 were interested in a woman pastor, I was called to an entirely new opportunity. The U.S. Congress had just opened the military chaplaincies to women and I was chosen to be that first female chaplain, serving in the U. S. Navy.

I met Donald in a committee meeting at the 1973 General Assembly in Omaha; he had already been a parish pastor for 11 years. I asked him to marry me, and 3 months later we began life together while I served as a Chaplain and he was a civilian, teaching management and directing an alcoholism treatment facility for the Navy. During those challenging years, he was my sole support person, for which I will ever be deeply grateful. After our three years in Orlando, we began an 18 year period as co-pastors, serving congregations on all four coasts (Los Angeles, Washington D.C., Cleveland, Ohio, and Jackson, Mississippi).

My path of ministry has been greatly influenced by the fact that I was early in the process of clergywomen in the PCUSA and among the first clergy couples. I was well aware that churches called me because I came with a man, so that made me acceptable. Finally after 25 years of ordination I was called as solo pastor of a congregation in New Jersey, just outside of Manhattan. Each step of the way I experimented with what it meant to be different in gender, and bringing a whole new way of being and leading in church. Creativity has been my by-word always: creating a whole new role for women in my first call, being the “first woman pastor” in every church I served, and seeking a way forward in a time of immense transition in the Church and the world. My early involvement in music and the arts has always sought to find creative expression in witnessing to the faith and encouraging the people of God to use their variety of creative gifts to worship, witness and play.

When Kathryn decided to enter ministry I was surprised and overjoyed. We had not ruined it for her! She has continued to develop a new approach to her role as a pastor. But she has the added advantage of being younger, connected to the millennial generation, bringing fresh creativity and intimate knowledge of a new generation of people who so often are turned off by the church. There are many different ways of being a faithful church. So now in my second decade of retirement, I happily watch and support her into new phases of discovering what the resurrection energy of Christ looks like today in those who seek to be disciples of the One we call Lord.