

Building Relationships

Kathryn M. Lohre '99:
Providing Leadership, Seeking Unity

By Nancy Crotti | PHOTO BY BETH ROONEY

ON JANUARY FIRST OF THIS YEAR, at age thirty-four, Kathryn M. Lohre began her term as president of the National Council of Churches. In doing so, she became the first Lutheran and ELCA member — and the youngest woman — to lead the national ecumenical organization, which fosters relations among thirty-seven church denominations representing 100,000 local congregations across the United States.

Building relationships with those of differing Christian traditions, as well as with those who follow other faith traditions, has long been Lohre's passion. The daughter of an ELCA minister, Lohre, a laywoman, describes herself as an extrovert, even from childhood.

"I've always been a people person. I remember as a kid saying I was going to grow up and be president. I didn't exactly imagine that to be president of the National Council," Lohre says with a laugh.

She grew up in St. Paul's Macalester-Groveland neighborhood, close to Immanuel Lutheran Church, the ELCA congregation where her father served as pastor. Midway through her junior year at Minnehaha Academy in Minneapolis, Lohre's father was called to be the pastor of St. Paul Lutheran Church in Pine Island, Minnesota, about 15 miles northwest of Rochester. The transition from the city to a small town midway through high school was difficult, but Lohre considers it a learning experience.

"It was a really wonderful opportunity for me to engage with a new community," she says.

The subsequent transition to St. Olaf College was a natural one. Lohre is the forty-third person in her extended family to attend St. Olaf. Her family legacy at the college includes some of her grandparents, as well as her parents, the Rev. John T. Lohre '67, and Mary Nasby Lohre '69.

Lohre found the faculty at St. Olaf College impeccable. "They have formed me and changed me in ways that are so life-giving," she says.

As a St. Olaf student, her majors in religion, women's studies, and psychology required her to think globally and critically, and also broaden her perspective. Lohre was midway through her undergraduate career at St. Olaf when she participated in the college's Global Semester, a life-changing experience.

Exposed to the cultural diversity of Switzerland, Israel, Jordan, Egypt, India, Nepal, China, Hong Kong, and South Korea, as well as the social and religious diversity of the people she met, Lohre began to examine more deeply



some of life's biggest questions, which ultimately would lay the foundation for her life's work: "How do I live out my faith in relationship with people who don't share my faith but who also are answering God's call or living out their faith in some other focused way?"

Lohre's interest in religion and religious diversity led her to study the roles of women in interreligious dialogue — engagement among people of different



religious faiths. In addition to Global Semester, where she did an independent study on women's religious leadership and practices, she also spent a January Interim studying women's spiritual autobiographies at Holden Village, a Lutheran retreat center in the Cascade Mountains of Washington state.

L. DeAne Lagerquist, St. Olaf professor of religion, worked with Lohre on a research project for her senior thesis surveying women ordained in the ELCA. Lagerquist supervised Lohre's

senior year distinction project and saw a young woman who was poised for leadership, and well-grounded in knowledge and scholarship.

"She could see the big picture," Lagerquist says, "and was interested in what matters."

After graduating *summa cum laude* from St. Olaf, Lohre studied at Harvard Divinity School, where she obtained her master of divinity degree. She has since received an honorary

doctor of divinity degree from the Graduate Theological Foundation, a school of continuing education based in South Bend, Indiana.

“When I left St. Olaf and went on to graduate school, I found my niche at the intersection of women’s studies, religious studies, and international peace-building,” says Lohre. “What I found in my research was the critical role of storytelling. When we relate not just as women but as people with our stories, I think that’s a game-changer.”

As part of her M.Div. field work, Lohre spent time in war-torn Bosnia and the Balkans, working with an interfaith women’s project to learn about the role of women in peacemaking. She gained a new perspective on how religion can be manipulated to divide people — not only in other countries but also in the United States — and she strove to work with others to break down those barriers, to make religion a bridge for peace.

“I felt as if I had a faith-grounding to engage with neighbors of other faith traditions — and that doing so is part of my calling as a child of God,” she says.

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UPON GRADUATION, LOHRE continued her work of engaging religious difference, spending twelve years working at the Pluralism Project at Harvard, a twenty-year research project that has documented the changing religious landscape in the United States. There she researched the unique contributions of women to interfaith dialogue, including women’s significant leadership in the interfaith movement’s exponential growth since 9/11.

Lohre found that women have been historically overlooked in international peacemaking efforts, as well as in some religious institutions. She sought ways for women’s leadership to emerge and be nurtured, and found that it’s not necessarily through the ministry.

Non-ordained women play important roles in the interfaith movement, says Lohre, because they have the “wiggle room” to shape the future of the movement without requiring official sanction from religious bodies and leaders. She believes this means that the work can often be more creative and free, cultivat-

ing religious leadership in unexpected people and places, and invigorating social-change movements.

“Working with people of other faiths has helped me to clarify my own faith convictions as a Christian,” Lohre says, “and to sort out what that actually means for my day-to-day life and relationships; and it has invariably inspired my leadership of a broader vision of Christian unity and interreligious harmony.”

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St. Olaf religion professor Anantanand Rambachan, who has been involved in interreligious dialogue for more than twenty-five years, recommended his former student for the position at the Pluralism Project.

“She had a very strong interest in interreligious dialogue and relationships among religions,” Rambachan. That interest was further fueled at the Pluralism Project.

“I think that’s where she developed a great deal of experience and expertise in interfaith relationships and interfaith dialogue,” says Rambachan, who remains in touch with Lohre. He believes she will be a strong leader as president of the National Council of Churches.

“What is going to be distinctive about Kathryn’s leadership, I think, is that she will bring all of the skills in fostering interfaith relationships,” says Rambachan. “I think she will be not only a good Christian leader but an interfaith leader.”

Lohre was very active with the World Council of Churches in 2009 when she received the phone call notifying her she had been nominated as a candidate for president of the National Council of Churches.

“I was shocked,” Lohre says. “I thought for certain that they had the wrong person.”

She’s had a strong supporter in the Rev. Donald McCoid, assistant to the presiding bishop of ecumenical and interreligious relations for the ELCA. In addition to becoming president of the National Council of Churches, Lohre was also asked to be the director of ELCA ecumenical and interreligious relations, which involves working under McCoid’s leadership.

“I was sure there were those who thought, ‘Someone so young?’” McCoid says. “But even to hear Kathryn speaking briefly, you wouldn’t say that anymore.”

Some did oppose her nomination, however, due to her age and perceived lack of experience. The opposition made her two-year term as president-elect difficult, but while she was learning about the National Council and its governance, Lohre realized that those who opposed her did not know her. She decided not to take the opposition personally and chose to listen to her heart.

“I had to consistently go back to my sense of calling in those months between the phone call and my election,” she says. “I felt so persistently called.”

A number of people, including St. Olaf Professor Emeritus of Art Mac Gimse ’58, believe Lohre has the potential to be a game-changer at the National Council of Churches because she’s young and engaging enough to attract younger people to the sixty-two-year-old organization.

“Kathryn seems to me to be one who can take hold of adversity and not let it get hold of her,” says Gimse. “She loves the learning curve.”

Lohre credits her family, which includes her husband, the Rev. Timothy Seitz who is pastor of Lutheran Church of the Cross in Arlington Heights, Illinois, and their four-year-old son, John, and her support network at church for her self-confidence and drive to succeed.

“My parents and mentors always taught me to believe that nothing is impossible,” she says. “I now believe that if I practice and work at it, and if I find the right people who share the same vision, there is nothing that cannot be achieved.”

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