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Janice Kay Riggle Huie

By *FELLEY LAWSON*, *ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE* May 4, 1997

Publication: *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette (Little Rock, AR)* Page: 1D Word Count: 1936

Caption: Photo by Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/STEPHEN B. THORNTON

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"Some very wise laymen and laywomen helped me learn what it means to be pastor in the sense of shepherding the flock. I feel real grateful for that. I needed them to teach me what it means to be present with those who are sick, dying, experiencing grief, those who are really struggling for faith."

Janice Huie is a wife and mother -- making history as the first female bishop for Arkansas Methodists. And her faith is from personal experience.

Even in the presence of God, nothing can bring a church service to a screeching halt like the wafting odor of a dirty diaper.

Early in her ministry, Janice Huie was preaching in a rural Texas United Methodist church when, in the middle of her sermon, she caught a whiff of something. Looking out over the 21-member congregation, it wasn't hard to pick out the culprit -- her squirming infant son.

Huie stepped down from the altar after suggesting that her understanding flock begin a hymn. "They sang 'Amazing Grace,' and I changed the diaper," she laughs. In this little country church, there was no running water -- so "Thank goodness for wipes."

Small of stature, with a warm, wide smile, Huie seems like one who could meet challenges great and small with grace and humor. As a high school student, she felt her place in the world would be made in the United Methodist Church; she followed up on this conviction by enrolling in seminary where there were few women, and where she knew no one.

Going into the ministry, she says, is "something I was called to do ... but I had to take it one step at a time. With each step I took, there was a sense of rightness about what I had done."

In September the ministerial steps she had taken brought her from San Angelo, Texas -- where she was a UMC district superintendent -- to Arkansas, and where she made church history as the first woman elected the state's resident bishop for the United Methodist Church, and the second woman elected to the UMC's eight-state South Central Jurisdiction.

With her husband, Bob -- a pastoral counselor at the Samaritan Pastoral Counseling Center in North Little Rock -- the new bishop has settled into life in Little Rock where she oversees as chief pastor the lay 760 United Methodist churches in Arkansas. From Sept. 1, her first day on the job, she began scheduling visits with every charge -- or group of United Methodist churches -- in the state.

"That's no small job," says the Rev. Gladwin Connell, executive director of the UMC's Little Rock Conference Council on Ministries. "She's the only bishop we've had to do that within six to eight months of arriving here."

Connell, who's worked with Huie on conferencewide UMC issues for about 15 years, describes Huie as "very pastoral, very caring, very compassionate. She has a good grasp of what's going on in the church today -- not just the UMC, but the church worldwide. I think she has a vision for where we ought to go, and she's helping us get there."

Huie was elected to follow retired Bishop Richard Wilke during the UMC South Central Jurisdictional Conference held in Kansas City, Mo. More than 330 people -- about half clergy and half lay people -- gathered to cast votes on church business. Nominated with about 11 others, Huie was chosen after almost 15 months of interviews around the conference and a two-day election.

"United Methodists want an open process. That's the reason for the interviews, to allow everyone who is voting an opportunity in a smaller setting to be able to ask you questions," she says. "It makes a more equitable way for people to make faithful decisions about how to vote. Everybody's got a chance."

Huie's election came on the 16th ballot. "To be elected out of this process is a very humbling experience," she says. "It's an arduous process. In order for someone to emerge, people have to keep talking to each other. Every vote is preceded and followed by prayer. And what we hope is that what we're doing is God's will."

When Huie emerged with the necessary 60 percent vote, she and Bob were joined by their son, Matt, and his fiance, Shambryn, both juniors at Texas A&M University in College Station. Huie's parents also arrived from their home in south Texas. Still a little dazed by the excitement of the preceding hours, Huie began to contemplate where this turn in the spiritual road was taking her.

"It's a journey that you lean into, and like any journey in life, one doesn't know where it will come to," she says. "You don't always know what's around the bend."

One of three daughters, Huie has been in church since the Sunday she was 6 weeks old. A cum laude graduate of the University of Texas at Austin, she pursued what she felt was divine instruction and enrolled in the Perkins School of Theology in Dallas. In the Oct. 4 issue of the Arkansas United Methodist newspaper, she recalls that at that time, "The first clergy woman I ever saw was [during] my senior year in seminary, and she didn't have a job. ... And I thought, 'Oh, dear God, what have I done?' "

In 1973 -- with her master's degree in hand -- Huie landed a job as associate pastor of University United Methodist Church in Austin. "I was so scared," she says. The Texas state capital "is sort of a liberal-thinking town, but there were few, maybe no other women ministers at the time. I remember going into my office and thinking, 'Do I have any idea what I'm supposed to do?' But it was very fulfilling, very rewarding to be working with people."

For one who made her public speaking debut as a 17-year-old county Farm Bureau queen, delivering a speech about screw worm eradication during a barbecue dinner, the theme of Huie's first sermon was heady stuff. "Recovery of the Transcendent," she says, explored "having a relationship with God; the need for people to have a renewed sense of the transcendent in our world, a recovery of the sense of the holy in our midst. And in a real sense, [that has] been a theme in all my ministry, and in all my preaching."

A unique opportunity was presented the Huies when they were asked to co-pastor St. Mark United Methodist Church in Austin, and then the First United Methodist Church in Mason, Texas. It was in Mason, says Huie, that "Some very wise laymen and laywomen helped me learn what it means to be pastor in the sense of shepherding the flock. I feel real grateful for that. I needed them to teach me what it means to be present with those who are sick, dying, experiencing grief, those who are really struggling for faith."

In this rural county seat, "Their gift [was] depth, and it helped deepen me."

With each congregational assignment Huie accepted within the UMC, there were usually a couple of tag-alongs with her just about everywhere she went. From the time they were babies, Matthew and his younger brother, David, who died in a go-cart accident in 1994, were fixtures in Huie's ministry.

"I had a baby bed in the office, and this rocker was in my office," she recalls, patting the arm of the rocker where she sits. "We were lucky to be in churches that appreciated that."

Of her sons, she adds, "People cared about them. Neither child ever met a stranger; they thought everybody you met was a friend. In that sense, our children were extraordinarily blessed. They had more cookies from a package than they had from scratch, and sometimes they fussed about that. But on the whole, they were thoroughly blessed."

Part of the nature of the pastorate is to set an example for others through one's faith. After 13-year-old David's death, Huie says, she found herself faced with the question of how that tragedy would affect her own spiritual life.

"There's a hole in your soul; even though you have faith, there's always a sense of absence," she says. "I think Bob and I would both say everything about life is different because of David's life and death and living presence with us now -- 'communion of saints' is the Christian language for that.

"When on Easter Sunday we sing 'Christ the Lord Is Risen Today,' it has a special meaning for us. We have a new understanding of the Resurrection. I hope I'm a more compassionate person because of it. I know I listen at a deeper level to people's hurts; that faith in Christ -- it sounds so trite to say it's deepened, but it either deepens in response to tragedy or you dry up and blow away."

The morning in March after tornadoes ravaged parts of Arkansas, Huie hit the road to see the damage for herself and meet those whose homes, churches and businesses were damaged or destroyed. Connell observes, "After David's accident I saw her faith deepen and grow, and I saw that same faith evident after the disasters occurred as she was reaching out to the people who were emotionally hurting, giving them an embrace, a word of encouragement. She just radiated her faith."

Making her way around the state to meet UMC members, Huie found that "There's something so wonderful about the depth of loyalty of United Methodist lay people to their churches and their pastors. I'm in church after church where these good, good people love their churches and their pastors," and are willing to overlook the faults they find in them. "We live in a world in which people are real quick to point out your faults."

Much as she loves her new responsibilities, Huie says she misses a few aspects of congregational life. "Going to the hospital, baptizing babies and being with someone who's dying and going on to the other side. Those are rich pastoral experiences." As an administrator, though, "It's exciting to be part of the process in which a church [grows into] what God calls it to be."

She's also got her mind on what she hopes will happen for United Methodists during her tenure in Arkansas.

"I long to see the United Methodist Church in Arkansas be more effective in making disciples for Jesus Christ and ministering to people in need. There's enormous good will, resources -- there are dedicated people," she says.

"What I long for us to do is put all that together in a way that, by the grace of God, we can be more effective making disciples of Jesus Christ and reaching out in compassion."

SELF PORTRAIT: JANICE HUIE

m DATE AND PLACE OF BIRTH Dec. 15, 1946, Beeville, Texas.

m MY HERO IS -- Theresa of Avila. She's one of the first women in a major leadership role in the church, a 15th-century Spanish saint, part of a great reform movement in Spanish Catholicism. A fascinating woman.

m FAVORITE HYMN -- "Hymn of Praise" by Natalie Sleeth.

m BEST ASSET -- My love for people and the fact that my faith is real simple.

m WORST HABIT -- When I get really tired, I forget names.

m THE TALENT I WISH I POSSESSED -- To play the piano. Any musical instrument, really, but the piano would suit me fine.

m MY SON WOULD DESCRIBE ME -- By saying, "My mother loves ministry, and she'd wait you out on anything. Mama can wait longer than anybody." He used to be frustrated by that. I can be patient with people; I'm real eager to keep the notion for change in front of them.

m TO RELAX, I -- Love to be outdoors -- camping, hiking, listening to a river run or a brook trickle.

m FAVORITE KIND OF MEAL -- Mexican.

m FIRST CAR -- A dark blue '62 Volkswagen Bug.

m ONE WORD TO SUM ME UP -- Loving.

Arkansas Democrat-Gazette (Little Rock, AR)

Date: May 4, 1997

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