



Women on the move – Her Story



Name: Rebecca Voigts Larson
Country of Origin: Canada
Date of Birth: 25 April 1950
Church: Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada
Period of Mandate: 1970: Delegate to Evian assembly and World Encounter of Lutheran Youth (WELY); 1990: Advisor to Women in Church in Society, Curitiba assembly; 1994 – 2002 Executive Secretary for Development Education, Department for World Service.

Brief Biography: I was born in Canada. My father was a campus pastor and my mother a teacher, vocations which from an early age shaped my understanding of myself and the world. For much of my youth, our house was also a Lutheran Student Centre, a place for Lutheran university students to gather for worship, bible study and conversation, much of which focused on the intersection between the church and the world. It is at this intersection between church and society that I have lived my life.

In 1970, when I was 20 years old, I was selected as a delegate of my church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada (ELCC), to the 5th assembly of the Lutheran World Federation which was held in Evian France, having been shifted from Porto Alegre, Brazil at the last minute. I was also invited to join the pre-assembly youth travel and study programme in Latin America, the World Encounter of Lutheran Youth (WELY). These experiences changed my life. I learned to understand the world through international eyes; I came to know myself as a member of a global family of Lutheran and ecumenical sisters and brothers; my analysis and interpretation of world events was shaped by a preoccupation for justice, peace and the sustainability of the whole planet. My life also changed that summer because I met and later married a young man, Stephen Larson, who was also attending the Evian assembly (as an advisor for the Lutheran Church in America – LCA) as well as the WELY. Since that time, our lives, our marriage and our family have been defined in significant ways by the values, work and relationships that we have found in the LWF.

My formal education has focused on psychology, theology, culture and international development. I completed bachelors degrees in psychology (Waterloo Lutheran University) and education (Pacific Lutheran University, USA). At the Masters level I completed an MA in Religion and Culture and an MDiv (Wilfrid Laurier University), leading to my ordination

as a pastor in the Lutheran Church in America. I served as a parish pastor in Edmonton, Alberta while also facilitating ecumenical social justice programmes across Canada, including with the Canadian Council of Churches. In 1988 I received my PhD in International Development Education (University of Calgary), just before moving to Geneva when Stephen was called as the pastor at the Geneva speaking English-speaking Lutheran Church in the Bourg de Four where he served, finally, for 17 years. This remarkable congregation served as a Lutheran worship community for LWF and ecumenical staff in Geneva as well as for hundreds of guests and visitors. Stephen attended the LWF Budapest assembly as Coordinator for the Stewards Programme.

I continued my ecumenical justice work with the World Council of Churches as Executive Secretary for Development Education. In 1994 I moved from the WCC to take a job with World Service as Executive Secretary for Research and Development Education where I was engaged in a number of key projects. I worked with other members of the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response (SCHR) to create internationally recognized standards in humanitarian response that are now foundational for the delivery of humanitarian assistance: *the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief*, and the Sphere Project, including the *Sphere Handbook. Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response*. Also, during these years I was editor of the *Development Education Forum*, worked to establish LWF programmes on HIV and AIDs, and together with other colleagues created the *Guiding Principles for Sustainable Development*, a framework for understanding and responding to sustainable development within the work of the LWF.

I was also responsible for involving the LWF in a newly emerging coalition of organizations which would come to be called the *International Campaign to Ban Landmines*. At that time, at least 85 million and possibly more than 100 million un-exploded landmines lay scattered across the world, throughout at least 62 countries. In Cambodia, it was said, demining was taking place “an arm and a leg at a time.” Used in war, or internal conflicts by non-state actors, landmines were claiming many more civilian casualties than military. Started by the Viet Nam Veterans in the USA and supported especially by Red Cross field doctors who were finding themselves amputating the limbs of too many civilians, including children, the coalition came to include 1,600 groups representing environmental, disarmament, refugee response, human rights, medical, disability, humanitarian and peace organizations. For the LWF, it was impossible to work with communities in post-conflict or mine-saturated situations unless the mines were removed and future mines not laid. My job was to bring the support of the LWF to the campaign, and to play an active role in its work, which I did as a member of the ICBL Coordinating Committee for almost ten years. It is not widely known that much of the financial support for the ICBL, in the early days, was from LWF related agencies and churches. In 1997, the LWF was present in Ottawa, Canada, when the vast majority of the countries of the world signed a global ban on the development, use, trade and transfer of anti-personnel. As a member of the Coordinating Committee, I also represented the LWF in Oslo when the ICBL, together with its coordinator Jody Williams, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. We left the LWF in late 2002 to move to Chicago where I served with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) an LWF member, as Executive Secretary for Church in Society, before returning to Geneva in 2011 as Deputy General Secretary for the ACT Alliance. Since returning to Canada, I have completed one more Masters degree, in spiritual care and psychotherapy. Currently entering into retirement, Stephen and I live near Toronto where I am teaching at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary and working as a psychotherapist; he is serving an ELCIC congregation as interim pastor and chairing the international worship Planning Committee for the LWF assembly in Namibia.

