

'Coronation' Gives New Meaning to Life of Improv Actress

by Kristen Cook – Arizona Daily Star – October 14, 2012



I give them hope. The biggest part of my job is giving hope.



Laughter belongs in church. So says Lesley Abrams, the new pastor of St. John on the Desert Presbyterian Church. "I think we're meant to be joyful people," says Abrams, who will pull out puppets and put on improv shows. Making folks laugh is how she helps them see their connection to the ancient book that is the Bible. "I want it to come alive for them, not be a history lesson," Abrams says. It's only been a few months, but the laughter's already started at St. John.



George Zimmerman, Bernie Zimmerman and Ann McKenna get a kick out of Pastor Lesley's puppet named Stew (full name – Steward Ship).

So, this actress/comedian walks into a Presbyterian church...

Sounds like the setup to a great punch line, doesn't it? Well, here's the thing - it kind of is. But it's also the very true story of Lesley Abrams' life, Phase 2.

"I'm sure, down the road, there will be a one-woman show," Abrams, 57, says – as she does most things – with a smile.

The local theater actress and improv comedian was recently commissioned as a lay pastor, although she referred to her commissioning as a coronation so often that she received several plastic tiaras after the Sept. 23 event. She keeps one, along with a matching wand, in her small office in a building next to St. John on the Desert Presbyterian Church, 2695 N. Houghton Road.

"Pastor Lesley" as she's called, heads a small congregation of 71 people. The church has had some rocky times with leadership, says Jack Mitchell, a self-described snowbird who's attended services at St. John for three years. To have Abrams as a pastor, he says, is a blessing.

"She is just wonderful," he says. "Every sermon she does is a joy to listen to. I used to fall asleep during the sermons."

You don't snooze with Abrams at the pulpit. At the first service after her coronation, er, commissioning, she pulled out a puppet named Stew (full name: Steward Ship) to talk about the church's annual financial campaign. She turned the sermon - about Queen Esther of Persia saving the Jews from genocide - into a church version of a Gaslight Theatre melodrama (without the popcorn, of course), urging the congregants to hiss every time she said "Haman," the villain.

When it came time for people to share their joys and troubles, Abrams added a personal note to each intention. In the few months she's been in charge, Abrams has been meeting with the congregants. She wants to know them - needs to know them - since her job is to guide them through what she calls their faith and life journeys.

"I never, ever had a job I loved so much," she says.

Her own faith and life journeys began as an only child in New York, where she was raised in a decidedly nonreligious home. Her father is Jewish, and her late mother, Christian. Their families weren't happy about the mixed marriage so religion wasn't stressed. Instead, when she was about 12, her parents left the whole religion thing up to her. She explored Catholicism and Buddhism but failed to find a spiritual connection.

She did, however, discover a love of performing. She went to New York City's High School of Performing Arts, the inspiration for the 1980 movie "Fame" and 2009 remake, and yes, Abrams says, kids really did dance on the tables at lunch. She also studied improv at Second City in Chicago. Abrams and her husband, Dean Steeves – who now proudly calls himself "the pastor's wife" – founded the improv group LaughingStock Comedy Company, which creates shows for companies based on audience suggestions.

At the time, they were living in Portland, Maine. A trip to Arizona made them want to move west, and after their daughter went off to college they came to Tucson 14 years ago.

Abrams' mother, who was frail, moved with them and was eager to find a church in her new hometown. Abrams dutifully accompanied her mother "to every single church on the east side."

They discovered Christ Presbyterian Church, and the woman who'd been seeking her faith finally "drank the Presbyterian Kool-Aid."

“I love being a Presbyterian,” says Abrams. “I’m proud of what we do as a congregation. We’re very mission-minded. . . . We’re on the front lines of helping people in need throughout the world. Also, because it’s hard to spell and I feel proud of myself every time I do.”



Pastor Lesley Abrams, center, leads her congregation in prayer. The local theater actress and improv comedian was recently commissioned as a lay pastor, although she jokingly refers to her commissioning as a coronation.

Abrams says she didn’t so much have one a-ha moment as a series of them. “When you move to a new place, you see everything with new eyes,” she says. “I think those new eyes made me see the hand of God in my life.”

Little by little, she took on more responsibility with the church, preaching occasionally and becoming director of the children and youth ministries program. Under Abrams’ leadership, Sunday Funday School attendance doubled in six years. Her program helped youngsters experience Bible stories in different, creative ways, whether it was through a cooking lesson or a puppet drama. Sample Abrams twist: creating a 40-foot whale out of garbage bags and a big fan so the kids could see what it was like to be Jonah, in the belly of the beast.

“Lesley brought energy and creativity to that ancient word that just brought it to life, not just for kids but to all the people in the church,” says the Rev. Steve Melde, who’s led Christ Presbyterian since 1996.

People began treating Abrams as a faith leader, Melde says, and soon she started to see herself that way, too. She took online courses to become a pastor through the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary. She’d already been a substitute preacher at St. John, when the job came

open earlier this year. The congregation chose Abrams to lead them in August.

Abrams, who’s written two one-woman shows, is very much a one-woman operation at St. John. Four days after her commissioning ceremony, her silver Nissan truck - its back window decorated with white shoe polish proclaiming “just commissioned” - was the only vehicle in the church parking lot.

Her goals are to grow the church and launch a children’s program. First, though, she has to get some kids. Aside from a handful of teenagers, St. John has no youngsters in its ranks. None of this will be easy at a time when church membership, no matter the denomination, is dwindling.



Pastor Lesley Abrams of St. John on the Desert Presbyterian Church talks with Pat Bowman. Sheryl Taylor is in the background

“There are moments when I say, ‘Are my shoulders big enough?’” says Abrams. “Then something happens, clicks into place, and I feel God’s hand.”

Abrams’ new job also means less theater work, and she’s fine with that.

“I can really pick and choose and work with people I love,” says Abrams, who will start rehearsing in January for Live Theatre Workshop’s production of “Regrets Only” by Paul Rudnick. The show opens in March. Of course, she’s still active in LaughingStock, which will perform at St. John’s annual stewardship dinner Saturday. After that, it’s a show for a hypnobirthing group. Seriously.

Really and truly, Abrams says, there’s not a lot of difference between acting and preaching.

“It’s as noble a profession in its own way as being a pastor. People who make theater, not just actors, help us make sense of things. People on stage are stand-ins for you and me, even in a dark character like Martha in “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?”

She played that part in an April production. “It gives us clarity about our humanity. You realize you’re not alone in this universal struggle of being a human being.”

And as a pastor, Abrams says, “I reveal who we are as human beings, where God’s hand is in that. I give them hope. The biggest part of my job is giving hope.”

Pastor Lesley Abrams says her favorite Bible passage comes from the New Testament, Romans 8:38-39: “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

“Nothing will make God love us less, and we test it regularly,” Abrams says. “The gift of grace is God’s love for us despite our brokenness.”