

Carolyn Ratcliffe's journey to Wayland religion faculty filled with challenges_30705

March 11, 2005

Posted: 3/11/05

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PLAINVIEW—If someone had asked Carolyn Ratcliffe 40 years ago what she intended to be doing at this stage in her life, she would have gladly replied, “making quilts and baking cookies.”

Somewhere along the line, however, her life took what she considers a divinely inspired detour, leading to her current position as assistant professor of religion at Wayland Baptist University.

“This is not exactly what I intended to do with the rest of my life,” she explained, sitting behind a large desk in a small office stacked wall-to-wall with books.

Carolyn Ratcliffe

In fact, when she first attended Texas Tech University straight out of high school, Ratcliffe had only one thing in mind—get married. She met her

future husband, Ted, during her first year at Tech. The two were married, and she left school to raise a family.

“I accomplished at school what I intended to accomplish, and that was get married,” she said. “I never intended to go back.”

Four years later, Ratcliffe was on her way to visit her mother. As she topped a hill near Dickens, she felt a clear sense of direction, clear as a voice telling her to go back to school and complete her degree.

“When I arrived in the Lubbock, the first thing I said to mother was, ‘I’m going back to college,’” she said.

She completed her degree in education in 1966 but never entered the classroom as a teacher. Ratcliffe spent the next 20 years rearing her children. It wasn’t until her daughter, the youngest of four children, politely asked her not to join the PTA board during her high school years that Ratcliffe started feeling “rather useless.”

“I remember praying and asking God what I should do with the rest of my life. The kids didn’t need me anymore,” Ratcliffe said.

A few weeks later, as she and her husband were attending a worship service at Highland Baptist Church in Lubbock, she again sensed that guiding voice.

“It was just so clear,” she said. “‘Go back to school and teach my word in college.’ When I walked into church that morning, that was the farthest thing from my mind.”

As Ratcliffe attended the evening service, she listened to a guest speaker preach about Jonah running from his Nineveh. The preacher that night was Gary Manning, religion professor at Wayland.

“That sort of sealed it for me,” she said.

At age 45, Ratcliffe decided to return to college, entering the master's program at Wayland. After finishing her master's work in 1989, Ratcliffe applied to the Ph.D. program at Baylor University.

Although she was eventually accepted by Baylor, Ratcliffe was beginning to see some underlying resistance to her calling from Christians who believed women should not teach men in a religious setting.

Taking seminary courses between her time at Wayland and Baylor, Ratcliffe said she was always the only woman in the class.

"Everyone was trying overly hard to be nice to me," she said. "But the professors were all very accepting, with the exception of one."

Ratcliffe said she took one course under a prominent professor that she enjoyed very much. On the last day of class, she walked up to him to tell him how much she enjoyed the class.

"He looked at me seriously and said, 'We have enjoyed having our one token female student in the class,'" she said. "I had never even said enough in class for him to even know my heart."

Ratcliffe said she found the statement "interesting," especially from someone in his position. But she didn't let that deter her. It wasn't the first time she had heard something negative about her intended career choice.

"Everyone told her, given the situation, that she shouldn't be doing this because there will never be a job for her," explained Fred Meeks, chairman of the religion division at Wayland. "Jobs in religion are by far the toughest to get. But she was going through with her calling."

Meeks, who taught Ratcliffe as she worked on her master's degree, watched her progress through the Ph.D. program at Baylor. By the time she completed everything but her dissertation, Meeks had been promoted to

division chair and was looking for an adjunct faculty member to teach courses at Wayland's Lubbock campus. Meeks asked Ratcliffe if she would be interested in teaching some courses, and she jumped at the opportunity.

Ratcliffe was awarded her doctorate in 1995 and continued to teach as an adjunct professor at Wayland, a position she held seven years.

"She was teaching regularly four to five courses a semester," Meeks said. "Finally, I went to the administration and said it was not ethical for us to be using someone to teach full time and not give them faculty status."

Meeks explained that was at a time when there was a lot of controversy in the Southern Baptist Convention, and every move was viewed under a microscope.

"Wayland was taking a big risk," Meeks said. "Not only to employ a woman teaching in the religion department ... that was risky enough. The seminaries had used women to teach church history and things like that, but not Bible courses."

Meeks said Wayland's administration didn't hesitate, offering Ratcliffe full-time faculty status in 1999. Meeks said, to his knowledge, there has been no resistance to Ratcliffe. In fact, she has been asked to teach at various associational meetings, as well as the Pastors' and Laymen's Conference that Wayland hosts every February, and she was just named 2004-05 recipient of the favorite professor award as voted on by Wayland students of all academic backgrounds.

Ratcliffe said she has always felt accepted at Wayland and hopes she can now be a role model for young women who feel called to the ministry.

"I tell them to toughen up and understand that their call is from God and not from human beings, and that they have to follow what God has told them to do," Ratcliffe said. "Church history is full of individuals who

followed God and paid a price for it. I tell them they are going to find some resistance in some areas. Although, I think by the time my generation dies off ... there will be a day where there will be no resistance, but we have to get rid of us old dead-heads first.”

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