When I moved to Montana in early August of 2013, the first thing my fiancé wanted to do was take me huckleberry picking. I hadn’t been in town more than a few days when I found myself on a mountainside having my first taste of these delicious berries. We picked buckets full and took them home, putting most of them on cookie sheets in the freezer – to keep them for pancakes through the winter. The next day the whole house smelled of huckleberries!

Grant and I married that year, and we settled into life in the mountains. Grant was the pastor at First Lutheran in Plains, and when we decided that I would come to live in Montana with him we knew the job prospects would be slim for me. But, the Holy Spirit had plans for me there, and I was called through the Montana Synod to work with the United Methodist Church as the pastor of three small congregations along the Clark Fork River – Plains UMC, Paradise UMC, and Whitepine UMC. Ecumenical work was challenging at first – we had to learn to speak one another’s language before we could really do much together. One of the congregations, Whitepine UMC, saw the retirement of their beloved pastor of 30 years followed shortly by her passing. I did her funeral within the first few months there. Only 2 of the 3 congregations had worked together before, so we were putting in the hard work of getting to know new people, and bringing disparate systems together all at the same time. Out of that crucible was formed a partnership that was more than the sum of its parts. Not only did each of the very small United Methodist congregations get their pastoral needs met, we also found that each congregation (though they started out small and stayed small) was experiencing growth.

A little over a year later Bishop Crist called my husband and me asking if we would be able to cover another congregation, Our Savior’s Lutheran in Thompson Falls, as their pastor had taken a new call on the other side of the state. We talked it over and decided that if all the congregations were on board to work together, we could make it work. We took the idea to each congregation’s council, and with the help of the synod office we put together a working agreement that allowed us to serve all 5 congregations. So was born the River of Life Parish,” a joint ELCA/United Methodist ministry along the Clark Fork River. A lot of work went into forging that bond. Assumptions were challenged, programs were reconsidered, spaces were opened, things that had “always been done” were questioned. It was something of a “trial by fire” for us all!

One of the naturalists in the parish shared with me the best way to find huckleberries each year is to look where there was fire a year or two ago. It turns out that huckleberries love the new, sunny spaces created by fires, and are one of the first things to grow in an area that has burned. So while the fire is difficult, and hard to live through, there is new life on the other side. New life that can flourish in the space that has been opened. Our call to Montana may have been difficult at times, but after going through the fire each of the congregations experienced some of that new life – some of that resurrection that comes after the hard work of dying and grieving. And while our view is always imperfect on this side of heaven, it was wonderful to glimpse God’s resurrecting work in the midst of our beloved River of Life Parish.

Reverend Amanda Applehans Montana Synod 2013-2015