From 10,000 Lakes to the Big Sky: Glad to be serving in ELCA/ Montana Synod

I grew up in Anoka, Minnesota in 1960’s and 70’s. In the fall of freshman at Luther College (Decorah, IA), I met a female student leader who was a Religion major. When I learned that she planned to become a Lutheran pastor, I asked her, “Really? Can you do that? Can women become pastors?” She assured me that it was possible. How had I missed out on hearing this great news? Even so, I had my own ideas of what the future would hold. I was determined to become either an Art Teacher or an Occupational Therapist. Soon enough, I chose the latter.

Graduating from the College of St. Catherine (St. Paul, MN) in 1977 with a degree in Occupational Therapy, I worked in Fargo, ND and Spokane, WA. As our family grew, I did less OT and became more active in the community; primarily as a lay leader in church and frequent Art volunteer in the schools. Some would ask if I’d ever thought of going to seminary. Life seemed plenty full as it was. I just wasn’t ready to hear the call.

It wasn’t until I was widowed at age 47 that I did a major re-evaluation of life. God was still calling. What patience & persistence! With Luther Seminary’s development of a Distributive Learning (DL) program for a Masters of Divinity degree, I began classes in the fall of 2007. Like many women before me, I combined seminary classes with work and family. As a DL student, I was able to keep the family home for my college-aged kids, work part-time in O.T. and engage in online coursework. Twice a year I flew into my home state of Minnesota with a two-fold mission: Spend time with my father and complete the on-campus “intensive” courses. It was a wild schedule to keep for five years, but it was worth it.

  I graduated from Luther Seminary in May, 2012 and was called to serve with First English Lutheran Church, Great Falls. I’m grateful for the clergy women who preceded me at First English, namely Rev. Jessica Crist, Rev. Sandy Van Zyl and Rev. Val Metropolis (Interim.) Each was instrumental in opening congregational eyes to the intellect, creativity and voice of women in pastoral leadership. Meanwhile, in the wider community I’m still on the receiving end of comments like, “you’re the first lady pastor I’ve ever met.”

I had a long history of driving from Spokane to Minneapolis (and back again.) Crossing the wide expanse of Montana gave me plenty of time to wonder ‘what would it be like to live here?’ Now I know! It didn’t take long to catch the “independent” vibe of Montanans and their fervent love for the land. One of my greatest gains from living and serving in Great Falls is heightened awareness for the lives of indigenous people. In particular, I honor the countless Native grandmothers who ground their family in Spirit, love and tradition. They’re up against challenges far greater than me as an ELCA Pastor.

Rev. Barb Gwynn