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Reflections on being a female pastor in Montana, September 2020

If I didn’t believe, really believe, in the Holy Spirit before, I did after I received my first call at First Lutheran Church in Plains, MT.

Who would have thought it possible? It was 2008, and I had just graduated from the Lutheran Seminary at Philadelphia. Not only had I gone to seminary on the east coast, I had grown up there. In high school, I wandered around art galleries in Manhattan wearing mostly black. I pierced my nose at 17. I had never lived in a real, small town, never attended a high school basketball game.

Plains is a small, conservative, western town, full of hardworking people whose lives seemed to bear little outward resemblance to my own. The town of Plains had seen only one female pastor in all of its 10 churches (the Methodist congregation) in history.

But the Holy Spirit was at work: One of the congregation’s daughters had gone off to seminary a few years back, and the church was mighty proud. Another of First Lutheran’s Norwegian farmer founders had a granddaughter on the path to ordination. I’m thankful for those two young woman, because their very existence and pastoral calling helped pave the way for me. And the retired, interim pastor, who became a beloved mentor, encouraged the unlikely match between First Lutheran and me.

Thanks be to God: it was a match. The congregation respected and cared for me. The members rolled with the changes I made: the singing of the psalm, the introduction of the common cup. They showed up at bible studies and forums. Together we grew a Wednesday school program, and began a prayer-walk group. The women of the congregation sewed baby quilts when my first child was born, and they smiled to see my husband become the stay-at-home parent. And when that old Norwegian founding member was getting ready to die, he let me know in his gruff and gentle voice that he’d realized “a lady pastor wasn’t a bad thing.” It’s one of the highest compliments I’ve ever received.

Like many first call pastors, I left before I could have much of a lasting effect. Yet there was time for affection to grow both ways. There was time for First Lutheran to help me learn that serving as a pastor is a great gift: I get to hear people’s stories of joy or grief, baptize children, sit vigil with the dying, ponder the meaning of scripture texts, steward God’s mysteries.

After leaving Plains, I served as Pastor of the Bratislava International Church in Slovakia. My present, third call is as Pastor/Priest of All Saints in Big Sky, a shared ministry of the Episcopal and ELCA Lutheran churches, back in the mountains of Montana. But the people of First Lutheran in Plains will always hold a piece of my heart. I thank them, and Christ’s Spirit at work in them, for their gracious support during my first years of becoming a pastor.