The Rev. Barbara J. Westhoff

Westby Lutheran Parish, 1987-2015

Memories abound of ministry in “Big Sky Country,” including the first time I drove in a thunderstorm with lightening flashing everywhere I could see, or snowing so intensely I could not tell where the horizon was, or the blazing azure sky days as durum rippled like ocean waves. I learned quickly if I pulled over mesmerized by the waves of grain, someone would stop to see if I needed help.

Mostly I remember the people, learning from their faithfulness, their grief, their dedication to the land and herds, to teaching or healthcare, to their communities. Recalling joy celebrating baptisms, affirmation of baptisms, and weddings with several generations of family. Helpful colleagues in our cluster and synod who shared the burdens, offering encouragement and hope. I remember several “pillars” struggling to keep congregations surviving and keeping traditions from their homeland alive. I have the lefse stick they gave me after what turned out to be the last session of that “ladies aid” lefse making.

There were those that leapt in faith to build an accessible fellowship hall when sealing out flooding failed. Because donors were so generous while Immanuel was building, the committee decided to keep having steak dinners to reach out to oil field workers and “pay it forward” to others.

Small town life was not always idyllic. One Saturday morning I received a phone call from someone several towns west of us that I did not know. That person was asking me who was killed in the car accident just out of town. I had no idea of the accident itself, let alone who was involved. The caller knew my husband had been working at the 9-1-1 (dispatcher) Telecommunication office during the time of the accident, and assumed I knew about it. She did not understand my spouse’s integrity, or that I did not know. Other examples include pastors finding out while shopping that the town knew of their pregnancy before they had even told their own family; and congregations knowing their pastor was taking a new call “through the grapevine” before the pastor told them.

Some tragedies will stay with me forever, especially the grief over their son/brother/uncle who is still Missing in Action. It often happened that when I thought about interviewing for another call, someone would confide in me some deep heartbreak and I would get the sense that God was telling me to stay. Finally, it became clear transplant medication “brain fog” would continue, and the council preferred retirement. Even now when friends post photographs of harvesting, sunsets, and Big Sky moments, I miss it. I am blessed having served in the Montana Synod.