My name is Tonya Eza, and I served the congregation of Hope Lutheran Church in Powell, Wyoming, from October of 2012 to April of 2017. I just love explaining to people that yes, I was serving in the Montana Synod but I wasn't actually in Montana! I was the first female pastor that Hope had ever had, and this was my first call out of seminary. I couldn't have asked for a better congregation to be my first call. They were very kind to me and helpful, even when I had to have major surgery after only a few months of being their pastor. One of the funniest memories I have of serving there was the day that my council president walked in to the church office and asked me if I knew how to massage a horse. When I tell my colleagues here back East about that, they think I've won the contest for the strangest thing anyone thought their pastor might be able to do! But the important thing is that I learned that day that there is such a thing as horse massage, and that gave me a piece of the picture about what living in Wyoming was like. The other thing that I learned that I think is important for any pastor to know is that life doesn't stop just because the new pastor has arrived. The day I arrived in Powell, some people from the church came to find me as I was directing the moving company to unload my things into storage, and they told me that a high school student who was a grandson of one of the congregation members had died in a car accident. His funeral was my second day on the job, and I think I met half the town of Powell that day as they crowded in to Hope's sanctuary to honor this young man.

Even though I was the first woman to serve Hope as their pastor, I believe that the people of Hope treated me fairly and did not hold me to a higher standard just because I was a woman. I remember there was one gentleman who did not believe that women should be pastors, but he had had other problems with some of the directions that the ELCA had been going, and he had stopped being a regular attender before my service there. His wife was a pillar of the congregation and did not have any problems with me because of my gender. When this man died, the family asked a male pastor in Billings to do the funeral in a location other than the church building; this gentleman was a friend of the family. This colleague called me and spent a lot of time on the phone with me saying how distressed he was that they hadn't asked me to do it, and my response was that if this gentleman didn't want to be buried by a "woman pastor" then the family was honoring his wishes, as abhorrent as we may have found them to be, and that I would be present at the funeral to represent Hope. But I was heartened by the collegiality that he displayed in that instance.

And that collegiality was displayed throughout the Montana Synod, and in my journey since then, I have been trying to get pastors in the Synods that I have been in since to understand this. If one of my people got sent to a hospital in Billings and I couldn't make it right away, I had no qualms about calling up one of my colleagues there and asking her or him to go check on the person for me until I could get up there. And that person would usually do so and then call me to let me know they had visited and to update me on how the person was doing. I always felt like the Synod had an attitude of "we're all in this large far-flung Synod together so let's help one another out", and I loved it. I wish more Synods had this attitude.

So, thank you, Montana Synod and Hope Lutheran Church in Powell, WY, for being my first call out of seminary. I loved it and I learned so much from all of you!

Blessings,

Rev. Tonya Eza

Grace Lutheran Church, Johnstown, NY