My Ministry in Montana – Pastor Elizabeth Liggett

After living away from my home state of Montana for 40 years, I moved to Billings in 2017 with no call, no immediate prospects, and no clarity regarding my future in ministry. I immediately got to work networking and introducing myself around, including attending the Billings ELCA pastors’ monthly gatherings, and meeting with Bishop Jessica Crist.

Bishop Jessica was very accessible, and in our first meeting she shared that because of her experience as a young geographically restricted female pastor, she is intentional in enabling opportunities and exposure for others in similar circumstances. True to her word, within weeks, I had my first pulpit supply gig in Big Timber, and within months was appointed to the Hetzel Board. This was my beginning in navigating that scary place of being new and unknown and jobless.

I was hesitant in coming back to Montana because it is so isolated, geographically vast, and under-populated. But I’ve learned that those conditions actually can offer unique opportunities which wouldn’t be available in more easily resourced places. Thus, in January 2018, I began a part-time call as chaplain for St. John’s United’s fledgling hospice program. With only one unit of CPE under my belt, I would never have qualified for this position in a more urbane setting, but there simply isn’t available an abundance of people with the usual credentials around here, and head of chaplaincy Pastor Karl Guhn took a chance on me.

Then, in the summer of 2018, Bishop Jessica approached me with the possibility of serving as “Vice-pastor” at tiny Grace Lutheran Church in the imaginary town of Barber, 70 miles northwest of Billings. This entails leading worship for the 10 or fewer faithful of Grace once or twice per month, and coordinating the LPAs who fill out the preaching roster. Without flexible arrangements such as this, tiny, isolated churches such as Grace would have to close their doors.

Finally, in the winter of 2019, while I was taking a CPE unit at St. Vincent’s Hospital in Billings (the only CPE program within hundreds of miles…), Pastor Steve Loy of Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd approached me. They were short staffed and he wondered if I’d help out. What began as a five-hour-per-week position there focused on pastoral care morphed into a half-time position fully integrated into the staff, and now temporarily interim lead pastor.

So, three years later, I now work in ministry full-time plus, navigating between a fascinating variety of settings. Hospice chaplaincy stretches me in ways I never imagined and offers this sometimes-tired-parish-pastor a different future option in ministry. My two parish positions couldn’t be more different from each other, and offer a stimulating contrast in leadership and creativity challenges. I’m grateful that my life situation has enabled me to be open to these opportunities, and feel the movement of the Holy Spirt in the opportunity to serve and use and develop my gifts in such a unique way.