

Debbie Johnson
JOURNEY OF FAITH

As child, I was pushed out the door to the very small Lutheran church across the street from our house. I loved going to church! I remember so well the songs and the stories that were sung and told by my primary Sunday school teachers. My mother attended the church when I was in a program or doing something special. My father rarely attended.

My maternal grandfather, who died in 1984, had a great influence on my faith as I was growing up, and I spent a lot of time on Sunday afternoons glued to the stool next to his recliner listening to him talk about the Bible. Education was very important to my grandfather, and he graduated from high school at a time when most students had to quit to help their parents on the farm. Though my grandfather knew a lot about the Bible, I remember him shutting his Bible one day and telling me that it was really about “how you live your life.” I was his favorite grandchild, and I know that he would be very proud of me today.

When I was 10 years old, a young pastor, right out of seminary, came to that little Lutheran church, and he had a great influence on my early faith. I was the star student of his 3-year confirmation class, the “nerd” who soaked up his every word like a sponge. He left the church when I was 15, and I still keep in touch with him, mostly through Christmas cards. I told my parents in 8th grade that I wanted to be a pastor for my vocation. Perhaps that was the first stirring of God in my heart, pointing me in the direction that I eventually headed. I don’t think that the Lutheran church was ordaining women at that time. Following that pastor came one who swore and smoked, and I became disillusioned with that church and began attending a Catholic folk mass for college students with a friend. I could not see then how the church could be involved in social issues or how my faith could shape how I viewed the world.

Though I was all set to attend college and major in social work, during my senior year of high school, I met and fell in love with a Presbyterian named Jan Johnson. I gave up my college dream to get married in 1970. It was then that I became Presbyterian and attended his church each Sunday while my husband mostly sat at home. During the wind, snow, sleet, and rain, I took three children to church each Sunday.

I now realize that I was just going through the motions of being a Christian during those busy years while my children were growing up, even though I was very active in the church. When I attended a Peacemaking Conference in 1989 and heard all kinds of interesting speakers talking about justice and peace, I became excited. I became active in Presbytery following that, and my friendship with several pastors influenced my faith. One of those pastors encouraged me to begin college, which I did in 1991 at the age of 38. I was in a marriage then in which I had to “check” the church talk at the door. I divorced in 1999, and 18 months later felt the clear call to seminary, which was affirmed by leaders of P.W. and several pastors in that Presbytery.

Seminary brought up some tough issues in my life, mainly living with two alcoholics, both in denial, and I felt unworthy to be there at times. But my seminary colleagues helped me with that. I struggled with my call and left in 2003 before getting my dual degree and taking ordination exams. I attended Al-Anon meetings and counseling while in seminary.

After I left seminary, I went to Charleston to return to social work, putting aside my call to ministry. But God had never given up on me as I became a part of two congregations, one which I joined and one in which I did my supervised internship. Those faith communities wrapped their arms around me and in that process, I once again heard the call to ordained ministry. I started the process of becoming an Inquirer once more.

My first call was as a chaplain in a multi-level of care retirement community in Clinton, SC, and I served there for 8 years. During that time, I attended Week One of Interim training, and left SC in 2017 to become the Interim pastor of Faith United Church in Oswego, NY. My time in this church is coming to an end due to the church's financial difficulties, and I look forward to seeing where God will be sending me next.