

Twenty-one years ago, I was sitting in my apartment in Madison studying for final exams when the phone rang. On the other end was Pastor Dick Rehfeldt. Windsor Heights Lutheran Church had just started looking for a Family Life and Youth Ministry Director and a friend of mine from Des Moines had somehow passed along my name. I'm not entirely sure how or why this transpired. I certainly wasn't looking for a job. I still had a year of graduate school left, and I had never considered a career in ministry. Sure, I had taught Sunday school as a high school student, and I'd done a 3-month internship at a church my junior year of college. But I had been an irregular attender for years and my biblical knowledge had holes the size of the Grand Canyon. Nevertheless, our conversation lasted 45 minutes and ended with a plan for me to come down and "just meet some people".

When I rolled into the church a few weeks later, wearing a T-shirt, shorts, and my Texas, it became immediately clear to me that we had a different opinion of what it meant to "just meet some people". I was ushered into a room where three professionally dressed women greeted me eagerly and started asking questions. I was too shell-shocked to remember their names, but I do remember their enthusiasm, passion, and joy. The next morning, I met with Pastor Rehfeldt between services and then attended worship. Again, I was greeted by many with kindness and warmth. I specifically remember being approached by a beautiful woman with long blonde hair, who gave me a hug that started a lifelong friendship. That woman was Dana Leahy.

The next day I was offered the job. After I picked myself up off the floor, I asked for two weeks to make my decision. Accepting the position would mean dropping out of graduate school and giving up my full academic scholarship and research assistantship. It would also mean telling my parents. Two weeks went by and I still didn't have a decision. In my heart, I knew what I wanted to do, but it didn't make any sense. On the day I was supposed to call the church, I received two pieces of mail - a letter from Pastor Rehfeldt and the packet of information for my research assistantship. I tossed my grad. school packet aside and tore into the letter from WHLC. I didn't know how I felt about the job, but I knew how I felt about the people. If they were willing to call someone as unqualified and as uncertain as me, then I was willing to go.

The next four years changed the course of my life. Though I was the one who had been hired to lead and help nurture the faith of youth and families in the congregation, it was all of you that ministered to me. During weekly high school youth group and confirmation, I saw the light and love of Jesus working in and through each of you. During trips to Mexico City, Mississippi, the National Youth Gathering, and our yearly Boundary Waters trips with my favorite guide ever, Chuck Safris, I saw the light and love of Christ in each of you. In the relationships built through the Secret Pal program, Sunday school, multi-generational events, and even flamingo fundraisers, I saw the light and love of Jesus in each of you. When I messed up, you showed me grace, and when I succeeded, you celebrated. When my mother died, you grieved with me, and when I got married, you rejoiced. Each of you showed me what it meant to be a follower of Christ - to love as you have been loved. I may have felt lost and uncertain when I arrived, but I knew who I was when I left - a beloved child of God.

After leaving Windsor Heights, I had the good fortune of working with Pastor Chris Olkiewicz at St. Andrew's Lutheran Church in Ames, IA. I find it hard to believe that any youth director could have had three greater mentors than Pastors Dick Rehfeldt, Cindy Keyser, and Chris Olkiewicz. It was a true joy to work alongside each of these faithful servants. I remained at St. Andrew's for 6 years before moving back to Wisconsin. It was incredibly difficult to leave, but we had one son and another baby on the way, so it was important to us to be close to family.

During our time in Wisconsin, I worked at two other churches before Dan accepted a position in Pennsylvania as the Executive Director of Bear Creek Camp. The camp was on the verge of closing when we arrived, and there was much uncertainty. But God is faithful. And God equips even beloved monkeyshines like my husband. During the 6 years we were there, camp attendance grew over 80%. We are humbled and grateful that God invited us to be a part of that.

Because Dan's job kept him busy visiting congregations on Sundays and attending meetings in the evening, another paid ministry position for me did not seem like the best fit for our family. Instead, I decided to pursue writing. I had fallen in love with children's literature while working at a Barnes and Noble during graduate school and quickly discovered I enjoyed reading picture books much more than scholarly articles. Much, much more. Even though I once again felt uncertain and unqualified, I decided to dive in. I'm happy to share that I recently signed with my agent and hope to be able to announce some exciting news soon. That said, there have been many ups and downs over the past 5 years. Unlike Windsor Heights, the world of publishing is mostly filled with silence and rejection. However, what I learned here, from all of you, is the truth that can be found in I Thessalonians 5:24. This verse was given to me as a source of encouragement while I was working here in this place, and while I was doubting my own qualifications. It is a verse that I have hanging above my desk, and it is a verse that encourages me whenever I am feeling uncertain in any area of my life. "The One who calls you is faithful, and He will do it." It was true here in this place for me, and it is true for each one of you. God has equipped you to do the work that God calls you to do, and the evidence is everywhere. In the people you touch, and in the lives that you change.

This verse seems especially relevant these days since Dan recently accepted a position as the Executive Director of Mt. Morris Camp and Conference Center in Wautoma, WI. There is, once again, much uncertainty and much we don't know. It was difficult to leave the people and the place we loved in Pennsylvania to come here, just like it was difficult to leave this place, and St. Andrew's, and every other place we have loved. But we are trusting the One who has called us.

"The One who calls you is faithful, and He will do it." If you all didn't believe that, then you never would have hired me, and my life would have turned out very differently. It was Pastor Rehfeldt who introduced me to Dan, and it was all of you who showed me who I am. Thank you for believing in God's power to equip the unqualified. And thank you for believing in me. I'm so grateful that I could be a part of the ministry here at Windsor Heights Lutheran Church. The impact you have had on individuals, on the community, and in the world is immeasurable. I have no doubt that God will continue to equip all of you to do the work that God calls you to do, now and for many years in the future. May God bless you and your ministry.