

March 23, 2020

Meet Rev. Susan Neinaber

I grew up in Webster City, Iowa. My parents were business owners. That was when the town had a functioning main street. My maternal grandmother ran the medical practice or business for a husband and wife doctor team in the city. That was the context in which I grew up.

When I was 13 years of age, my mother died of colon cancer. As a 13-year-old, trying to process that, I had been going through confirmation, that year. The day after her funeral, I was awake all night. I was just trying to figure out my grief as a 13-year-old. I remembered the language from confirmation class. I gave my life to Christ that night. In many ways, it was a considerable life-preserver for me to try to get through this tragedy in the family.

It was three years after that, one Easter Sunday, at the end of the service I came down the stairs from the balcony, and I said to my pastor, "I think I am called to ministry." He said, "Come and talk to me this week." That was the start of things.

Webster City was not that big of a community. There were 8,000 people. My church was huge. There were probably 700-800 in worship each week. I thought that was normal. I did not know until I was in college, that was a very large congregation.

I attended Central College in Pella, Iowa, a small private college. I went to Garrett-Evangelical for seminary. In college, I became very interested in social sciences and psychology. I started to feel strongly in college that I wanted to become a psychotherapist.

My psychology professors in college asked, "Why are you going to seminary?" I said, "Well, you don't understand the call. I have to do that first."

I went to seminary and was appointed to a little town in Iowa, where there were about 492 people in town. My husband and I were newly married at the time. We had a wonderful experience. I knew that I was going to need to pursue my interest in psychotherapy.

My husband grew up in St. Paul. We wanted to come back to a larger urban area. We moved to Minneapolis. I started a CPE residency at Abbott Northwestern. After one year, I switched and went into another residency program, with the Abbott Northwestern Center for Pastoral Counseling. The Center no longer exists. I started doctoral work. I eventually became a licensed marriage and family therapist and worked at Westminster Presbyterian Church in their counseling center for fourteen years.

About a year into my therapy practice, I started getting calls from denominational executives in the region. They wondered if I would come and resource some of their congregations. I had no experience and didn't know that there was a name for that. I told them I would experiment with them.

I started working alongside the denominational executives to do assessments of the congregations and figure out some ways to resource them. That was the beginning of a congregational consulting practice. I did that about 13 of the 14 years I was at the counseling center at Westminster. I had both the therapy practice and consulting practice.

Most of my therapy clients were individual clients, even though I was licensed as a marriage and family therapist. I did not see a lot of families. I saw a few couples. I developed an area of specialty in post-traumatic stress disorder. I saw a lot of people who had been victims of some kind of abuse in childhood or had adult traumas in their life.

The consulting practice continued to build alongside the therapy practice. In 2004, I was approached by the Alban Institute. I accepted a position as a senior consultant. For 40 years, the Alban name has been synonymous with building up congregations and their leaders.

I consulted across all types of religious groups. I was on the road a lot. I did some research, writing, and workshop. After a while, the travel got to be too much. My son was in middle and high school during those years. I become more and more burned out.

I had conversations with Bishop Sally Dyck, who served as the resident bishop of the Minnesota Area, and then Bishop Bruce Ough, who become the bishop for the Dakotas-Minnesota Area. Both of the conversations were inviting. I was asked by Bishop Ough to consider servicing as a district superintendent in the Minnesota Conference. I was intrigued by the direction and vision that Bishop Ough had for the Minnesota Conference.

Being a district superintendent had never really been something I aspired to be. I mentioned to my husband that I was considering being a district superintendent. He said, "Who are you, and what have you done with my wife?"

I have a great six years as a district superintendent. I enjoyed my work, getting to know the congregations, and providing resources for them. I have enjoyed getting to know the pastors and forming supportive relationships with them. I even became fond of the appointment process. God is profoundly at work in the appointment process. It is a very prayerful process. There are just things that we cannot know through our human abilities. Over and over again, you get to see God at work in the appointment process.

As I near the end of my term as a district superintendent, I began to do some discerning about what would be some possibilities. I did some vocational testing. Just to see, where am I now, and what is my skill set now? Over time, discerning with Bishop Ough, I was surprised. I certainly was not expecting to go to the Dakotas. But I am delighted.

I have heard such wonderful things about the Dakotas Conference that was drifting over the border. I attended the annual conference three years ago. There were so many things that

impressed me. I had been hearing that the Dakotas Conference kind of operates like a family. I resonate with that. I like systems that work like that.

I have been a close friend of the Moravians in this country. They were profoundly influential in John Wesley's life. They operate as a family. I felt adopted by them. I know that I am comfortable with that kind of culture.

My background is working with challenges and distress. So whatever challenges may come from General Conference or other types of challenges, I am comfortable in those settings. I can help people make good decisions about whatever they may have to face.

I am looking for a place in Mitchell, South Dakota. The size of Mitchell reminds me of the town I grew up in but a little larger. I am looking forward to being part of a smaller community. There are a lot of logistics to figure out.

There will be other changes in the cabinet. It is a great opportunity. The new district superintendents and I will travel together to Lake Junaluska for training. That will be an opportunity to build relationships and community. As a leader, I am very relational. I like to develop and nurture relationships.

I have met the members of the cabinet. It is going to be a great team. We will know who the new bishop will be in July, and that will be another key piece and a fantastic opportunity.

I remember meeting Rev. Rebecca Trefz, going to her training the first time to Lake Junaluska. I felt an immediate connection. We have done things together across the Dakotas and Minnesota conference cabinets. We have built a great relationship. I am going to miss the departing members of the cabinet.

I am going to be learning a lot as I move into the Director of Ministries position. The broad view I have about the position is that I will be working with people to plan and execute annual conference, significant work with conference committees, events, projects, and staff. I am looking forward to ways we can innovate as an annual conference.

Most organizations going through a transition need to look at what are some things we need to sunset. When everything is in transition, sometimes, that is an excellent time to review. I am looking forward to the position.

I loved the position of the district superintendence. I have been the dean of the last three years for the Minnesota cabinet. I look forward to new challenges.

I lead out of relationships. That is how I have always been wired. I look at the dynamics of relationships and build trust. Others might describe me as pretty fearless. I don't shy away from challenges. One of the other district superintendents, describes me as super encourage. I am able to support people during stressful times.

I love organizational dynamics. I love complex problem-solving. I love personal management. I love strategy. I am quite strategic. Those are the areas I naturally gravitate to.

I don't like forms. I rely on people who are more talented, who pay attention to those finite details. I need to surround myself with people that can support me through the details.

With every new job, we learn new things about ourselves. I am looking forward to learning.

I believe that God is powerfully at work here. Over and over again, when I worked with changing organizations. What kept me at the table was knowing that God was at work, and the Spirit was carving out a path for us. Part of it is being able to position ourselves to get into that flow so that we can cooperate with where the spirit wants to lead us. Instead of blaming one another, or getting into defensive postures, a lot of times when we get difficult, we need to let go. We need to cooperate with the flow.

We will get through it, especially if we attend to our relationships. There is no difference that is so great that we can not get through together.