

Adapting is key for Pequot Lakes pastor

By Dan Determan
Echo Journal

LAKE COUNTRY FACES

Tattooed on Pastor Jen Matthees' right forearm are the words "It's all good."

It serves as a reminder to make the best of any situation and pivot when the situation calls for it. It is a mantra that helped her decide to become a Methodist pastor just a few short years ago - after several years in the retail and food service profession - and it aided in her decision to move to Pequot Lakes to become the pastor at Grace United Methodist Church.

The Winona native said she had a Methodist upbringing, but grew up in a family that was not "uber" religious.

"My family went to church, in the same church where my grandmother was baptized and where I was baptized and married in, my parents were married there - it was our family church, but we kind of went on Easter and Christmas, that kind of thing," Matthees said. "It wasn't until I had kids and my husband and I decided that it was a 'more often' thing."

"I kind of transitioned into (ministry) after I got more and more involved in leadership roles and those kinds of things in the church," Matthees said. "I had a really good mentor and friend that said, 'Tell me again why this isn't what you're doing.' I said it was because I'm really too old to make that kind of career change, and I couldn't possibly afford to go to seminary ... We kept coming back to that conversation and then he finally told me that there are some other avenues, especially in the Methodist Church,

to become a minister." Upon hearing that, Matthees went back to school and finished her "regular degree," which led her down the path to become a licensed local pastor, which means she is not ordained, but she is licensed to perform pastoral duties where she is appointed.

She began her career in ministry with a quarter-time appointment in her hometown of Winona, where she served for roughly 18 months while also managing a Caribou Coffee.

"I preached every Sunday and I did all the pastoral calls, but then I was a full-time manager," Matthees said. "It went really well. I could control my schedule and I was pursuing my calling and was serving the church, and it was great."

However, when the call came in from her district superintendent asking if she would consider a full-time pastoral position in Pequot Lakes, there was very little hesitation on her part.

Despite departing from a career in the service industry, Matthees was surprised by how much of her knowledge accrued from those jobs have carried over into her role as pastor.

"Oddly enough, it doesn't feel like that much of a shift," she said. "I really felt like a lot of what I've done in my career as a manager had always been very developmental - a lot of training and coaching. The older I got and the longer I did it, the more



Dan Determan / Echo Journal

Pastor Jen Matthees became the pastor at Grace United Methodist Church in Pequot Lakes in the summer of 2020, conducting her first services virtually. Here, she stands outside the church on Monday

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PASTOR JEN MATTHEES

that became my focus for the businesses at times ... There came a natural transition of 'how can I do what I'm doing in a different way?'"

In June of 2020, she performed her first service at Grace United, albeit to an empty church, as the lakes area and nation were in the grips of the COVID-19 pandemic. That situation could easily overwhelm a new pastor, but Matthees said her past work experience has suited her well to adapt to the situation at hand.

"Because of what I've done in my past, I felt like I was really in a good mindset and had a good skill set to step into a difficult situation to lead during a pandemic," she said. "I can pivot. One of my biggest strengths is keeping everyone feeling like we can make it work and keeping everyone

calm. That is what's been needed the most during this time."

She came into this new role when many were struggling and political disagreements were heated more often than they were civil, but she has been pleasantly surprised by the demeanor of her congregation.

"I came up here not really knowing what to expect," Matthees said. "Every church likes to say, 'We're so nice.'

Everyone likes to say they are really good at hospitality, but it really does feel that way here. I have felt incredibly supported by this congregation and I have made some connections in the community that I am very grateful for as well."

She also helps out at the Pine River United Methodist Church, performing live services every other weekend there, with services out of Grace United being livestreamed in Pine River on the off weeks.

In many ways, she is still settling into this job she has had for just over a year, but Matthees is looking forward to helping lead her congregation to new, hopefully better days.

"When you first get to a new church, they

say, 'Don't make any big changes,'" Matthees said. "You have got to build up your social capital and not make waves at first. It has been such a weird year because nothing has been the way it was, but at the same time, it is a year of opportunity because nothing has to be the way it was."

In the meantime, she intends to continue taking in the wonder of the lakes area.

"I always thought that Minnesota is Minnesota," she said. "Winona is beautiful ... but it is a whole different beautiful up here, and I am amazed each day."

Dan Determan may be reached at 218-855-5879 or dan.determan@pineandlakes.com. Follow him on Facebook and on Twitter at www.twitter.com/@PEJ_Dan.

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