

To my All Saints' family,

I have officially wrapped up my first year at Seminary of the Southwest in Austin, Texas. This has been a whirlwind year of changes at our institution that students had to navigate through. I'm thankful for my cohort of 18 students, ranging from 22 years old to 62 years old. I am one of the few seminary students from the south and the only one from Arkansas.

It was extremely hard to navigate leaving behind my community and acclimating to a new one. There's a grief that is not spoken amongst the discernment process. A classmate of mine and I noticed people were dealing with food insecurity as well as feeling lonely. We requested funds from the student council to create a Sunday Family Dinner night which offers a home cooked meal to students for free. I told staff I was inspired by our food ministry, Neighbors Table, at my sending parish. I even befriended the bluegrass band at University of Texas and invited them to play at our Bluegrass, Burgers and Brats night. We average 40-60 people attending these monthly offerings and have suggested to the institution to create a work-study program from it.

I continue to work with Camp Mitchell part-time with reservations and hospitality, as well as being one of the hardest working dishwashers in the kitchen for my work-study at SSW. I'm grateful for the financial assistance from All Saints' and employment from Camp Mitchell to support my call to ministry.

Now that my first year is complete I'm now what you call a middler. Some say the most difficult season of a seminarian's life. Starting next month I am beginning my Clinical Pastoral Education at Baylor Scott & White hospital in Round Rock (30 minutes north of Austin). I will need to complete 400 hours, which includes 300 in the hospital and 100 in the classroom. Henry and Jeffrey will spend the summer in Arkansas before moving back to Austin in August.

As many of you know, I thrive on being productive. I was elected to serve for a second time as a deputy to the General Convention with The Episcopal Church in Phoenix to represent the Diocese of Arkansas in July 2027. I was also elected to our student council at SSW for our middler year. I'm happy to announce that my field education placement for the remainder of seminary will be at Jubilee Episcopal Church in Austin under the leadership of their vicar the Rev. Lizzie McManus-Dail. This is a small church plant in north Austin that is very pro LGBTQ, families, evangelism and social justice. I feel a calling to church planting and I'm very excited to learn from her. You can listen to her podcast, "And Also with You" or check out her first book, "God Didn't Make Us to Hate Us: 40 Devotions to Liberate Your Faith from Fear and Reconnect with Joy."

I'm also balancing that productive tendency with the spiritual practice of rest. I do enjoy sitting on my covered porch and bird watching, working in my small flower garden, creating whimsical beadwork, and sitting in silence in contemplative prayer.

I continue to hold All Saints' in my prayers and enjoy seeing you all via the livestream on Sunday afternoons. It came to me on Pentecost how each of you put your faith into action every day at All Saints'. What a joy it was to learn from all of you and take those gifts out into the world. I wouldn't be this prepared for seminary if it hadn't been for the love and support you all poured into me. May God continue to watch over you and bless you during this season of growth.

Melissa Simpson