

## **WE ARE FAMILY**

On World Communion Sunday in 1990, I was serving as liturgist at Maple United Methodist Church in Battle Creek. Along with reading the scripture, I helped serve communion alongside Pastor David Morton – something I had done countless times in my four years there.

But on this given Sunday morning, something felt different. I couldn't put a name to the stirring I felt inside. But after services, Pastor Dave turned to me and said, "If you ever decide to leave the newspaper business, you should consider entering the ministry."

And I thought, what a ridiculous idea. You'll never see me standing up front preaching to a bunch of people.

But that afternoon and the next two days, I couldn't get that comment off my mind. I called Pastor Dave and asked him whether we could do lunch. And when he met me, he told me when he arrived home from church Sunday, his first comment to his wife Carrie was, "You'll never guess what I said to Kathy this morning."

And her immediate response was, "That she should become a pastor."

That was the start of a year-long exploration of my call that ended up in my enrollment at United Theological Seminary. And in 1996, I was ordained an elder in the West Michigan Conference of the United Methodist Church.

As my ordination approached, I remember thinking how I would like something special to wear on World Communion Sundays to remind me of my call, and to remind me of God's amazing grace. And so when my parents asked me what I would like as an ordination gift, I immediately said, "A chasuble." And they said, "Sure, honey." Pause. "What's a chasuble?"

This is a chasuble. It is a poncho-like vestment that has been worn over the robes by clergy since the fifth century,

When I received it, there was nothing on it. But I pulled out my cross-stitch thread and I stitched the grapes and wheat at the top to represent communion. And then on the neckline, I stitched the name of the first church where I served communion as an elder: Horton Bay.

And then down along the hemline, in the green, purple and yellow colors from the grapes and wheat, I began stitching the last names of the families to whom I served communion in that parish. The Andersons, the Anthonys, the Babbitts, the Barkers. And then I at the end of Horton Bay's list, I added the names of friends and family to whom I had served communion at my ordination including my parents and grandparents.

Even so, the list of names didn't make it all the way around the front of the chasuble. But I assured the folks at Horton Bay not to worry. As that church added new families, and as I was appointed to new churches, names would continue around this robe.

And to it is that alongside Horton Bay, I've added Greensky Hill, Alanson and Harbor Springs churches. As I was appointed to each charge, I added the names of those households until I had two full lines of names and a third one started. Last month, I added Reed City to the top and 104 last names to the hem. (Thank you Brenda Marsh for unknowingly helping with this project by supplying me with the names on the attendance pads the first Sundays of July, August and September!) The Reed City list begins with the Andrews and the Baars down on the front center, and continue all the way around the back almost back up to the shoulder.

As I was stitching your names, I was praying for your households. Sometimes I knew of specific needs; sometimes I prayed without even knowing what God would or needed to do.

I also enjoyed seeing names from the past as I stitched: Reminders of persons to whom I am still connected. And in a way, so are you. You may never meet Pastor Dave and Carrie Morton, but because of their witness, I am here as your pastor today. A few of my former

parishioners may pop in now and again, but by the large, you won't meet the people from my past churches, but you are still connected to them because you are benefitting from the way they honed my skills as a pastor.

We are indeed family together, for we are sisters and brothers with God as our Father. We are all connected by the grace God freely gives us. As Paul wrote in Philippians 3:9, "to be found in Christ, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, a righteousness from God based on faith." That's what I wanted to convey by the way I put the names on this robe: the righteousness given to us by God's grace given through Jesus Christ.

First of all, if your name isn't on here, it may mean you missed the Sundays I've served communion to date. Not to worry: because you're here today, you'll be on the robe next year. That is, if you remember to sign the attendance pad.

In the past when several households shared a last name but not a family connection, I'd make a distinction usually by adding the first initial of each household leader. If the first initial were the same – in the case of August and Albert Johnecheck in Horton Bay– then I stitched the entire first and last names.

However, I had a new situation with Reed City. We have two Jim Thompsons. Stitching a J or even Jim before the last name wasn't going to make any distinction. They probably would have liked it if I had put Jim Thompson and the Other Jim Thompson, but they can never seem to agree on which one is the other – and it would have meant a lot of stitches! So when you check the hem, you will find J/L Thompson followed by J/S Thompson.

You'll also notice as you look around the robe that all of the last names are plural, including Dahlmans. As Christians, we believe in the communion of saints – the idea that as we

gather for communion on earth, the saints gather to commune directly with Christ in heaven. And so, I believed that the names of my widows and singles should be plural because at the communion table, we never stand alone.

And along with the names Brenda provided me from those here on the Sundays that communion was observed, there are names of persons to whom I have served communion in their homes: the Bugges, the Nickles, the Rathbuns and the Williamses. Even if they could not receive communion within the walls of the church, this is a way to remind us that the Lord's Table – and God's grace – extends well beyond our walls.

I have never removed a name from this robe when a parishioner has died. While they may no longer gather at our earthly communion tables, their names are not removed from this robe because they have not been removed from God's presence.

Likewise, I never remove a name from my robe because of differences I have had with a parishioner. I know *The Survivor* votes people off the island when that occurs. But names remain on here because they are God's children covered by His grace – the same as me. And I'm sure because of grace, we will continue to be together for eternity, so there is certainly room for them on this robe.

Finally, you'll notice the stitching of the names is nowhere near perfect. I've given up trying to make them that way. On cross-stitch linen, I can count on the material being uniform. As I'd round corners on the chasuble, I'd find the line would go from parallel to the hem, to diagonal, and back to parallel, which makes for some inconsistent lettering. But as I said, this robe is a reflection of God's grace, which is given to imperfect and inconsistent people.

Let us now enter into our time of communion together, turning to page 13 in the Hymnal before we as God's family gather at His table.