



Focus on Faith



Have you met Brenda Stevens? If you have visited the refreshment table after church, assisted at Faith's Table, or attended a church council meeting, you would find Brenda fully involved in these activities. Brenda became a member of Faith at the time that she married John Czaja. She came to us from Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Cincinnati, and her marriage to John was performed in our chapel by the Rev Peter Rudowski, the pastor of Good Shepherd, on September 10, 1994. It happened to be the 25th anniversary of his own marriage, and his wife accompanied him to celebrate this special time for Brenda and John. They enjoyed a glass of champagne in the church library after the wedding to celebrate the occasion.

Brenda had moved to Cincinnati the previous year from Nebraska to accept a teaching position in Psychology at Miami. Brenda had earned her PhD from the University of Tennessee and taught at the University of Nebraska before accepting the position at Miami. She actively participated in our church community until her husband's health began to deteriorate, and she was needed full-time as his caretaker. The church was there for her during those dark times, and she appreciated the support Pastor Logan provided her. After John died in 2019, Brenda found a warm welcome back to Faith, and it helped her deal with the grieving process.

Brenda grew up as a Roman Catholic and was baptized by a great-uncle who was a Catholic priest. (Her great uncle was the first-born male from a German family and was destined to be a priest. He joined a missionary order, went to China in 1920, spoke at least five languages, and eventually ended up in Rome working at the Papal News Agency.) As a child, she received pamphlets about faith from this uncle as well as weekly instruction, preparation for first communion, and confirmation instruction in the Catholic faith. She continued to practice her Catholic faith in college, where she volunteered to cook Sunday suppers for the student community in which she was involved.

During her sophomore year at Boston University in 1968, turbulent times became the norm after the assassination of Martin Luther King and the student marches against the war. In one of her courses, she was required to write a paper about a famous person, and being that MLK was a graduate of Boston U and that he had advocated for peaceful marches, not riots like she was observing, she chose to write about him. King's family had donated his papers to Boston University's special collections and she had the opportunity to see his papers and notes and even his dissertation and interview his dissertation advisor. She met his wife and children when they came to a special collections event and was invited to sit in the front row at a university event for a speech given by Coretta Scott King. Reading his dissertation introduced her to famous theologians Tillich and Wieman, who like Martin Luther, discussed "justification by faith" rather than earning one's place in the Kingdom and introduced her to a forgiving, loving and accepting God, quite different from the God she had been introduced to as a child. This was really the beginning of Brenda's journey to Lutheranism.

Brenda has had several experiences in life that have strengthened her faith and moved her into a closer relationship to God. One relates to her younger brother who lives in New York. About 25 years ago, he was diagnosed with multiple myeloma and was near death. He underwent an experimental treatment and has been cancer-free ever since. In her eyes that was truly a miracle.

Brenda's career as a professor, counselor and school psychologist has given her the opportunity to work with individuals from the age of 6 months to young adults in settings such as hospitals, public schools, universities and community settings. Throughout her career, she has taught conflict resolution and mediation skills in addition to designing readiness and reading screening programs. She has been awarded federal grants which facilitated early childhood vaccinations and helped Head Start children across a dozen counties form a deeper relationship with the men in their lives. If you haven't done so already, take time to get to know this very fascinating woman. You can nearly always find her sitting in one of the front pews with Pat Willeke - she provides Pat with transportation to church every Sunday - and after church she will be helping at the refreshment table for which she regularly brings a homemade treat to share.