

Meet Pastor Cheryl Stratton



Pastor Cheryl Stratton said asking what is unique about licensed local pastors is the wrong question.

Pastor Stratton, who serves four churches in the Northern Maine District, says her call to ministry is no different than an elder's. But the "obscenely high cost" of attending seminary made the Course of Study the right path for her.

"I don't see a difference in the call to ministry experienced by those who choose seminary and the call experienced by myself and other local pastors that I know," she said. "I know some still talk about that, but I don't see it."

Pastor Stratton said the pay difference between elders and licensed local pastors may influence how people perceive them.

"I think they get the message from the difference in pay," she said. "It's right there in black and white."

She used this analogy: You can get the brand-name soup or the Great Value soup, she said, adding, "Local pastors are a great value."

"I am called to preach, to teach, to go wherever the Holy Spirit would send me," she said.

And for Pastor Stratton that means driving a 175-mile circuit each Sunday to the churches she serves: Howland, Danforth, Vanceboro and First (Lincoln) United Methodist churches.

Services are at 9 a.m., 11 a.m., 2 p.m. and a supper church service at 4:30 p.m.

The 2 p.m. time slot is the toughest, she said, falling right in the middle of the day. Still, none of the churches opted for a service that would take place too late in the evening.

"They're afraid I'll hit a moose," Pastor Stratton said. In fact, she checks in via Facebook to assure her congregations that she has arrived home safely on Sundays.

"One of the challenges small churches face is that they very often are not able to invest as much in pastoral compensation, and that gets played out as having different congregations assembled into a charge," Pastor Stratton said.

But being close geographically doesn't mean the congregations are aligned in other ways. For example, one of her churches is nearing the end of its life while another is moving toward being able to support a full-time pastor. The economic and community situations are different for each church as well.

The differences can, at times, leave the pastor feeling a bit schizophrenic, she said. "Sometimes it's fun."

Pastor Stratton said mental health and substance abuse issues are among the serious challenges facing pastors – especially those in rural communities where there are few service providers or people to act as case managers or advocates, and clergy often pick up the slack.

"We have that in our churches; in any congregation you have people with mental health issues, substance abuse, sexual abuse, or trauma in their histories," she said.

These are areas where clergy could use more practical training, she said, along with training in how to navigate the social service safety nets.

"I find, and I'm sure it's true for others, a lot of the work I do – more and more – (is with) people in poverty with real quality of life needs."

Pastor Stratton is not daunted by the challenges. She loads her Kindle with audio books and carries a digital recorder to help her work on her sermons as she makes her circuit. "God doesn't ask us to do things we're not empowered, equipped and supported to do," she said.

"It's the right thing to do," she. "It is what God would have me do. I am blessed beyond reason and measure to be able to fulfill this call and claim on my life."