

Pr. Sarah Mayer-Flatt is our "Synod Storyteller."

In this role, Pr. Sarah will share stories of her own, as well as stories that are part of our shared life in Southeast Michigan.

You can look for these stories online & on social media throughout the year.

You are welcome to quote from her stories, share them friends, or put them in your church newsletter. Please remember to give Pr. Sarah credit if you do so.

Take a Seat: *"It was the summer of '69..."*

Actually Beloved, it was the summer of 1967, and civil unrest was ravaging the city of Detroit. In only five days, more than 1400 buildings were burned or destroyed and nearly 50 people died. To say that the city of Detroit was on fire was not an incorrect statement.

Barry Osterbur was working at an urban youth recreational program in Washington DC that summer following his graduation from Capital University. It was hosted by a coalition of churches. The experience he had that summer started changing the way he saw church: as a place where we are called to care for our neighbor, particularly those who may look and live differently than we do.

Barry grew up in east-central Illinois, a very rural area. It was an area settled by German Lutheran farmers. Their churches were large and well attended, but few interacted with each other or with the broader community. Barry sarcastically referred to it as the "ghetto" he grew up in. Moving to Columbus to begin undergrad, he saw more diversity in the world around him. By his junior year, he was also sensing some new directions in his life. "I studied math and physics in college, but conversations with a religion prof and a few others got me thinking, and by my senior year, I decided I would try this seminary thing out."

After his first year in seminary (at what is now Trinity, also in Columbus, OH) Barry was one of 2 classmates who decided to pursue a summer of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE). This was another urban experience. "My sense of call felt very generic, and I wasn't really sure what being a pastor would look like. So I wanted to try chaplaincy -- maybe that was for me." He studied and worked at Detroit General Hospital. It was a CPE site that would allow him to be closer to his now wife, Elaine, who was living in Toledo at the time. It's now 1968: a year after the devastating period of unrest, and the same summer that the Detroit Tigers won the World Series.

Barry remembers one particular patient whom he met that summer all these years later. Occasionally, chaplain interns were encouraged to sit in on conversations held by a patient's medical team. Barry found himself in such a meeting where doctors were flustered and confused over an older gentleman's sudden inability to walk. "I was asked if I'd have some spiritual conversations with him to see if his spirit was blocking him

from walking because of the protests continuing to happen in Detroit.” Barry never saw the man walk, but he will never forget their conversations.

His CPE experience allowed Barry to wrestle with, and eventually become comfortable with, two aspects of becoming a pastor. The first was coming to an understanding of what death and dying meant in his own life as well as those around him. A deeper remembering of childhood losses -- grandparents and cherished pets -- came out in his group and one on one sessions, and to this day he appreciates those reflections and the insights he gained. Barry also came to terms with his inexperience of being among diverse populations. Detroit General was a hospital full of black patients being cared for by a primarily white staff. Remembering his summer in DC, and now caring for inner city residents in a new way, was eye-opening.

Returning to seminary, he participated in a final urban experience in downtown Columbus. An after-school program for younger kids was coordinated by the Columbus Recreation Department. Because he had one college semester of gymnastics in a required Phys Ed class, he was designated the “gymnastics specialist” (of all things!). “I would show those kids some basic moves, flip them up in the air, and they just loved it!” Even Barry remarked on how unusual it was for him to be leading gymnastics, but we never know what gifts or skills of ours God will use.

As he was preparing to graduate from seminary with his Master of Divinity, Barry applied for a year-long Master of Theology program at Luther Seminary titled “Ministry in Social Change.” Grounded in the context of pastoral ministry, the classes focused on seeing community agencies and programs as an outreach and partner in the work churches are also doing. In addition to his academic work, Barry lived in a housing project on Minneapolis’ near north side and worked with a Covenant church there. “That year made me really feel called and solidified the way I see and do ministry. My call story is broader, more gradual -- I didn’t have a specific moment. But this capstone made me want to pursue sharing God’s message to the world.”

Barry served 3 calls at congregations: first, in southern Illinois for 5 years; then, on the south side of the city of Chicago for nearly 10; finally, he came to the SEMI Synod in 1987 (dear reader I was but a babe). While here he served at Cross in Clinton Township for 25 years before he retired in 2012. After retirement from the parish, he continued to serve as the Director of Candidacy, helping many through the process (myself included) for many years until stepping down in 2019.

Cheers, Barry, and Go Tigers!

Peace,
Pastor Sarah
SEMI Synod Storyteller

P.S.: Have a story you’d like me to share about your own congregation? Send me an email (sarah.flatt@gmail.com) and I’ll be sure to tell your story!