



This month Saint Paul celebrates love. As a seminary rooted in Christ, we are always centered in love, but the love we hold up in this issue is that of husband and wife. Cupid has frequented the halls of Saint Paul often and many students have found their spouse while learning exegetical skills, Christian ethics and ministry in context. This month the alumni devotional has been crafted by Marilyn and Jack Gregory, who met, became engaged, and married all while at Saint Paul and then proceeded to lead ministry as a clergy couple until retirement.

As I listened to Marilyn and Jack relay their story, I realized three things. First, call is always an individual journey even if you find yourself in a partnership for your entire professional ministry. Second, this is an extraordinary couple — committing to each other and the transformation of the world twenty-four seven. Third, Saint Paul was certainly different in the 1970s than it is today; and yet, its core has not changed.

Their paths to Saint Paul were certainly unique. Marilyn graduated from Iowa State University with a degree in mathematics and had not considered seminary until she found herself uneasy in student teaching. She said that she loved math because “it helped bring order to the chaos of life”; however, “math did not answer the big questions like ‘What is the purpose of life?’ and ‘How do we fit in that purpose?’” Through Wesley Foundation, Marilyn had met some faculty from Saint Paul and had made a brief visit to the seminary. So in her last semester at Iowa State, she applied to Saint Paul without fully envisioning what that might mean for her future.

Jack knew that seminary might be in his future before college. His path to Saint Paul began within the local church in Louisiana. As an adolescent, Jack’s mother suffered from chronic illness, and the local church became a supportive presence in his life. Not only did the church provide physical help and community, but it also recognized Jack’s leadership abilities and nurtured them by encouraging him to engage in church committees and programs. It was his pastor who asked if he had ever considered the ministry and helped Jack to understand his spiritual depth and call.

Although Jack’s route to seminary was more direct, neither had any idea that they would wind up marrying another pastor. They began dating in Jack’s third year and Marilyn’s first year at Saint Paul, and as they learned more about each other, they also began to reshape each other’s theology and understanding of ministry. Marilyn recalls a conversation after they had decided to marry. Jack said that her seminary training would be an asset to his ministry. At that moment, it became clear to Marilyn that she was called to be more than supportive of Jack’s work, she was called to her own ministry as well. And as soon as Marilyn said as much out loud; Jack understood and was from that day a cheerleader for Marilyn’s work. This is when they started to think of what being a clergy couple could look like and how a shared ministry might be possible.

They belonged to different Conferences — Jack’s membership was in Louisiana and Marilyn’s in Iowa. But, in Marilyn’s third year and with Jack enrolled in a year of Clinical Pastoral Education at Osawatomie State Hospital, they were appointed to a student charge at Fontana and Beagle,

Kansas. A year later, Centerville and Parker were added to their responsibilities. They were appointed full time, at less than the minimum salary, and both transferred to the Kansas East Conference. In 1977, they were appointed to another 4-point charge (Fredonia-Altoona-Benedict-New Albany). In 1981, both Jack and Marilyn shared one full-time appointment to Fredonia, trading three churches for an infant, Anna. Elizabeth joined the family two years later. In 1987, they moved to Chanute, which, by 1989, employed both of them full time. They served Trinity UMC in Kansas City before Bishop Fritz Mutti named them to the Cabinet as co-District Superintendents in the Topeka District and co-pastors of Perry UMC in 1997. They rounded out their service at Independence First before retiring in 2010 and serving on the Lenexa UMC staff.

In each of these appointments, the two served together. From the pulpit to weddings to capital campaigns to serving on the Cabinet, they worked as a team. They revealed how rewarding it was being able to serve as a clergy couple — both offering their unique gifts and perspectives — and the number one rule of their partnership: “never make people choose between us.” They worked cooperatively, set careful boundaries around their work, tried hard not to speak for each other and to stay out of triangles with parishioners or conference leaders. It required humility, communication, and respect for each other as they navigated shared ministry.

When I interviewed Marilyn and Jack, beyond detailing their lives’ work, they spoke of their time at Saint Paul. They lived on the Truman Road campus and were married in the Anna Kresge chapel by Dr. Henry Brockman and classmates, H. Sharon Howell and J. Pennington Morgan. They spoke of other professors — Tex Sample, Marian Brown, Eugene Lowry, Bill Lee, Lindsey Pherigo, Paul Jones — and spoke of learning what community was and how to build it through the relationships with students, faculty and staff. They reported that Saint Paul professors responded to invitations to teach and preach (and, in Dr. Lowry’s case, play the piano) in the congregations they served. They have treasured friendships with those who graduated with them. Amazingly, how they describe Saint Paul is how I would describe my time at Saint Paul four decades later. We all speak of a space centered on community, mentorship and theological exploration and rooted in praxis ministry and social justice.

There was a pause when I asked what advice they would give to current or future Saint Paul students. Jack stated: “Wow, let me see, Saint Paul is so different now.” Marilyn interjected not slowing to think of the differences between the past residential campus and the commuter or online students of today: “Keep your mind open. Be ready to use seminary as your thinking laboratory. Explore what you believe. Listen and learn from others.” Jack echoed, “yes, and learn about relationship and community. Don’t be afraid to examine and be critical of what you always thought. It is okay to let some things go. Let seminary introduce you to greater understandings and shape you.”

Happy Valentine’s Day, Marilyn and Jack. Thank you for living into your love for one another, creating an example of how to partner in ministry, and forging paths for future clergy couples.