

**2020 SYNOD ASSEMBLY REPORT**  
REV. JUDITH JOHNSON PASTOR COUNSELOR

I recently celebrated the 38<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my ordination.

Parish ministry was very definitely my first career. But about 15 years ago I found myself listening to a number of conversations about congregations that were struggling with change (does that sound at all familiar?) Churches seemed to know that they couldn't just keep doing what they'd always done, but they didn't know what else to do, and pastors were getting caught in the crossfire.

After listening to a particularly horrendous story about the leaders of two churches meeting together for the first time to discuss sharing a pastor (a "discussion" that turned into a shouting match) I mentioned to a friend that "somebody needs to get some training to help these churches and pastors navigate change." The friend happened to be a retired professor from the counseling program at the University of South Dakota. By the time that conversation was over, it had become apparent that I was the one who was going to go get the training.

I got a master's in counseling with the express purpose in mind of helping pastors and other church leaders to be their very best, healthiest selves, as they (as we) engage in this murky, mysterious thing called "servant leadership." And also to help church boards and councils to look at how they are functioning, and how those relationships and systems might be made healthier.

A lot of lip service is paid these days to "wholeness" and "wellness" and "practicing self-care". In the Western Iowa Synod, in 2019, a way was found to put this into practice by making my services available free of charge to any rostered leader in the synod as well as the lay leadership of any congregation. I am at the synod office in Storm Lake two days a month, and I am also available for consultation with groups, staffs, and boards as needed.

I continue to look forward with hope to the growing of this ministry. The needs are many; and pastors are on the front lines of the mental health struggles of their parishioners, as well as dealing with personal and vocational struggles of their own. I am grateful to be able to serve.

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