

Finding Her Voice Again In Small Town America

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life unfolded across Los Angeles, Beverly Hills, Santa Monica, Venice Beach, Seattle and Florida's Atlantic coast, from Palm Beach to Delray Beach and Boca Raton. Long days, restaurants and creative energy shaped her sense of normal, a rhythm built on movement and connection.

That history still shows. Her physical vibrancy feels earned rather than performative, the imprint of a life lived expansively across places far from farm fields and frozen gravel roads. Her presence suggests that faith does not require dimming yourself to fit the room, but asks you to arrive fully, with your light intact.

The Call Came Early

Her voice, once muted by grief and circumstance, has become central to her life again. Years earlier, she had tried to answer the same call.

When Lily was 4, Stussy was a single mother working full time as a chiropractor when she enrolled in seminary, convinced the tug toward ministry could no longer be ignored. At the time before online learning, classes meant physically showing up for nights and weekends, followed by hours of reading and preparation at home.

One afternoon, she looked up from her books and saw her daughter standing quietly at the edge of the table, waiting for her.

"I was studying one day, and she's right there," Stussy said. "And I was like, this isn't fair. So I just had to let it go."

The decision felt immediate and absolute. Motherhood came first.

The calling, however, did not disappear. It simply waited. In time, the season changed.

The Call Returns

Stussy recently served as youth coordinator for the Gran-Park-Rollag Parish, guiding youth ministry and preaching regularly. What surprised her most was not simply stepping into the role, but the vitality she found there.



Zena Stussy and Taylor Nelson share a moment during a church community event, reflecting the relational heart of Stussy's ministry.

The parish supports a youth ministry reaching roughly 100 children, sustained by parents who show up, volunteer easily and treat faith formation as a shared responsibility. Within months, the calendar filled quickly with service projects, retreats, seasonal events and hands-on learning unfolding at a steady, energizing pace.

"There is a lot of joy there," she said. "You can feel their confidence growing as they learn to speak about faith in their own words."

That energy mirrors something essential in Stussy herself. She describes herself, affectionately and accurately, as a "charismatic Lutheran" among communities shaped by generations of Norwegian restraint, inherited humility and steady devotion.

"I grew up with them. I know them," she said. "But I have a much more energetic spirit than the typical Lutheran."

Rather than tamping that down, she has learned to trust her own way of showing up. She frames it not as a departure from tradition, but as an invitation to honor the many temperaments and gifts that coexist in faith communities, where growth often happens at the intersection of difference and shared purpose.

Healing Before the Pulpit

Long before she stepped into a robe and stole, she had already lived a lifetime of healing. Before ministry, Zena spent decades as a chiropractor, a path she resisted for years despite Dave's persistent nudging.

"He hounded me," she said, laughing. "Every day he'd come in and say, 'You should be a chiropractor.' And I kept saying no. I told him, 'I've already done four years of college. To go back for pre-med and chiropractic school? I'd be 32.'"

Dave's reply was simple. "Well, you're going to be 32 anyway."

The Moment of Clarity

For a while, she kept saying no. She resisted until a pivotal turning point during her work with the Doolittle Raid Project in China, an expedition searching for the remains of World War II bombers. While there, standing in a river far from home, she experienced what she describes as an unmistakable moment of clarity.

"I had an epiphany standing in a river in China," she said. "The clouds parted, the sun came down, and it was like God said, 'You've

got to do this.' I'd been resisting for years."

The moment did not feel symbolic so much as a directive. It was not about geography or career advancement. It was about service, about stepping into a calling she had been circling for years.

So she went back to school. Two years of pre-med. Four years at Northwestern Health Sciences University. A career devoted to helping people find alignment in their bodies.

"You can run from your calling," she said. "But it's not really a straight line. It's more like a spiral. You come back around to the same place, but deeper."

That metaphor has stayed with her.

"As a chiropractor, I was taught that I'm only an instrument," she said. "I don't do the healing. I remove the interference, and the body does what it was designed to do. I believe that innate wisdom is God."

In both body and spirit, Stussy understands healing as something inherent rather than imposed. Her role, she explains, is to help create the conditions where healing can occur. In faith, that opening often comes through connection with Christ, restoring order, clarity and wholeness.

That understanding now informs her ministry.

Grief, Place, And A Small Country Church

The house in Pelican Rapids was never meant to be a permanent residence. Stussy purchased it a few years after the 2008 housing crash, when the real estate market was still reeling and properties often lingered unsold for years.

At the time, her family's small lake cottage nearby had begun to feel crowded. She found herself thinking she might want a little house in town instead, somewhere to take a hot shower, watch the news and step away from the constant motion of lake life. So she began driving through Pelican Rapids, looking casually and without urgency.

That was when she kept noticing the same house.

Each time she passed it, the large, stately mansion was still there, quietly holding its place with a for-sale sign out front. "It was just sitting there," she said. "And I thought, I'm going to get it."

The house was no ordinary home. Known locally as the H.E. Frazee House, it was built in 1915 by Harry E. Frazee, whose father, Randolph L. Frazee, was part of one of Pelican Rapids' founding families.

A House That Became Sanctuary

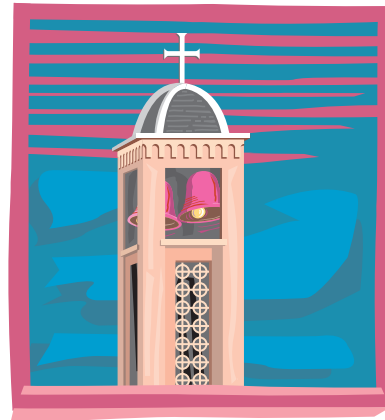
What began as a practical solution became something closer to a calling. Initially a seasonal retreat, the house later took on a deeper purpose, becoming a clinic, classroom, sanctuary and refuge. It was where illness was met with care, grief was held in silence and prayer, and long hours at a dining room table slowly shaped sermons, faith and a new sense of direction.

In ways she could not have anticipated, the house did more than shelter her life. It witnessed her realignment.

Life Realigned

For nearly nine months, her world narrowed to a dining room table, an open Bible and long hours of study and prayer. There were moments of doubt and confusion, times when she questioned whether she had chosen the right path. Still, she stayed the course.

During that period, she preached



That perspective shapes where she feels called next. She is especially drawn to young people navigating the uncertain space between adolescence and adulthood.

"This is when so many big questions come," she said. "It matters that they know someone is paying attention."

In the months since her time with the Gran-Park-Rollag Parish, Stussy has continued her ministry work across the region in a different capacity. She is currently serving under the Northwest Minnesota Synod, providing pulpit supply for ELCA congregations, most recently at First Lutheran Church in Audubon. She is also preparing for future service as a Synod Authorized Minister, continuing to follow the same call that first drew her into ministry.

At the same time, Stussy is nearing the completion of her formal theological training. She will graduate in May from Luther Seminary's Graduate Certificate Program after two years of online study, with commencement scheduled for May 31 at Central Lutheran Church in Minneapolis.

Alongside her continued work in rural churches, she has also begun exploring new ways to share her voice more broadly, including early plans for a podcast, writing, and speaking opportunities inspired by her recent experiences in ministry.

Whether she is standing in a small country church, guiding youth through questions of faith, or quietly considering how her voice might reach people she will never meet, Zena Stussy understands her life not as a series of detours, but one long, unfolding adjustment, a steady movement toward alignment.

"You can resist your calling," she said. "But eventually, it finds you."



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