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Three Sections - 28 Pages

Section B - 8 Pages

Pastor Greg DeMuth: A Ministry Rooted In Calm . . .

A Place Where Nervous Systems Can Gently Settle

By Chandra Buck
Staff Writer

When I met Pastor Greg DeMuth, he wasn't sitting behind a desk.

Instead, he pulled up a camping chair in his office, shifted a guitar out of the way so I could sit down, and gently redirected his five-month-old sheepadoodle, Pepper, who was still very much in her puppy era. The scene felt less like an interview and more like an invitation to exhale.

In the small details, the room already felt like a window into how he pastors. Nothing was staged. The conversation didn't rush. Even the guitar leaning nearby and the puppy learning how to settle seemed to match his belief that people do better when they feel safe, seen, and unhurried.

That feeling, it turns out, is no accident.

DeMuth, the new pastor at St. John's Lutheran Church in Barnesville, describes his role not in terms of sermons delivered or programs managed, but in how a church shows up for the community and how people feel when they do.

"It's like being home," he said of Barnesville, where he and his wife, Deb, arrived in April 2025. After years spent in larger congregations and metro areas, returning to

northern Minnesota felt natural. Comfortable. Right.

"It's like putting on your favorite flannel shirt at the end of the day," he said. "We fit here."

That sense of fit followed years in large metro congregations, including churches with more than a thousand members and dozens of staff. Over time, he realized he no longer wanted to manage systems and staffing charts. He wanted to know people by name.

"I'm officially over being a big-church pastor," he said with a smile. "I'd rather be with people."

For DeMuth, the impact of a congregation is not measured by attendance alone.

"I measure the impact largely by what we bring to the community," he said.

That includes visible efforts such as supporting the food shelf, serving food during community events like Potato Days and the county fair, and hosting block parties. It also includes quieter work. He visits congregation members at Valley Care and Rehab, checks in on those who are homebound, and makes a point of simply showing up.

"I don't want to sit in an office," he said plainly. "I want to be present."



Pastor Greg DeMuth and his wife, Deb, moved to Barnesville in April 2025 after years serving larger metro congregations. The couple said returning to a smaller, rural community felt like coming home.

That presence extends beyond church functions. DeMuth attends school activities and youth sporting events, not as a formality, but as a way of getting to know families where they already are. He describes much of that work as "ministry of mercy," practical care that meets people where they are. Sometimes it looks like a food shelf donation or a community breakfast. Sometimes it looks like brats at a summer block party, or a familiar face showing up for the parts of community life that matter.

His vision also reaches beyond Barnesville. DeMuth maintains a long relationship with a pastor in Uganda and recently shared a proposal with his congregation to raise roughly \$1,100, enough to purchase an acre of land and coffee plants so a family can grow its own livelihood. The goal, he said, is not dependence but dignity and self-sufficiency.

Pepper, he told me, is being trained as a therapy dog. She isn't there yet, he laughed, still bouncing with puppy energy. But the intention matters. It mirrors the instinct he brings to his work: a steady belief that presence, patience, and calm can help a nervous system find its way back to center.

That belief is grounded in more than pastoral instinct. In addition to being a pastor, DeMuth is also a therapist and a trauma-informed educator. He teaches at Concordia University in their master's program for school counselors, helping future educators understand how trauma shapes behavior, learning, and regulation. Recently, he shared that perspective with staff in the Barnesville School District.

"Trauma isn't just about what happened," he explained. "It's about what happens in the nervous system when someone can't cope."

He spoke about the importance of understanding fight, flight, freeze, and fawn responses, and about co-regulation. Calm presence, tone, and connection can help someone's nervous system settle.

"Not all adults know how to do that," he said. "But it's becoming more important than ever."

He has watched classrooms change in the years following COVID, with teachers describing increased dysregulation and fewer coping skills among students. It reinforces, he said, the importance of adults who know how to help a nervous system settle rather than escalate.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2B

Zena Stussy And The Long Work Of Becoming

Finding Her Voice Again In Small Town America

By Chandra Buck
Staff Writer

Zena Stussy does not talk about calling in a hushed or polished way. She laughs easily. She gestures with her hands. She pauses when emotion catches in her throat. Sometimes she says something so wry and self-aware it could just as easily land in a comedy set as a sermon.

Stussy, who previously served as youth coordinator for the Gran-Park-Rollag Parish and Synod Authorized Ministry, now provides pulpit supply for area ELCA congregations under the Northwest Minnesota Synod, most recently at First Lutheran Church in Audubon, as she continues as a SAM.

Her story does not move in a straight line. It coils and circles, returning again and again to the same questions at deeper levels. It winds from the Twin Cities to Pelican Rapids, from coastal cities like Los Angeles and Palm Beach to gravel roads and frozen lakes, from chiropractic tables to country church pews, from a lake cottage meant for weekends to a century-old house that became a place of refuge. Somewhere along that spiral, grief, faith and a long-ignored nudge finally aligned.

Though she often describes herself as a city girl, Stussy's connection to Pelican Rapids runs far deeper than her adult years suggest. Her grandparents, Ferdinand and Esther Olson, were longtime members of Faith Lutheran Church, whose iconic clock tower has long shaped the town's skyline. Older members of the congregation still remember her great-uncle, Orlando Olson, who operated Olson's Menswear in downtown Pelican Rapids for decades.

Her late father, Keith Olson, was a Pelican Rapids High School graduate, and much of her extended family is buried at Ringsaker Cemetery. Even as she was raised near Lake Minnetonka and spent much of her life elsewhere, Pelican Rapids was never unfamiliar ground. It was a place her family history had already claimed.

Pelican Rapids became home during a season she never anticipated. When her husband, Dave, the colleague who once urged her toward chiropractic, began to fail, Stussy brought him north so she could care for him there.

Her voice softens when she talks about him.

"He was such a healthy person. A chiropractor for 50 years. A



Zena Stussy leads worship at the Gran-Park-Rollag Parish, where she served as youth coordinator and regularly preached.

triathlete. Just an amazing man," she said. "It was so strange to watch him get so incapacitated. I miss him a lot, because we did everything together. Personal. Business. He was my best friend."

When Dave passed from heart failure, grief stripped away the scaffolding of her former life. For many people, that loss alone would define a lifetime. For Zena, it became the ground where a long-delayed call to ministry finally took root.

Christian rebirth is not instant or triumphant. It takes shape over time, often beginning in loss. Stussy's journey followed that pattern. Grief did not undo her life, but reshaped it, allowing something new to take root.

A Voice Waiting For The Right Words

Long before she ever stepped into a pulpit, Zena was comfortable in front of people. With a background in communications and a natural gift for storytelling, speaking came

"I've always been good at public speaking, radio, TV," she said. "But I never was mesmerized enough by the subject matter. And now, enveloped by this call and God's love, I really have something to say."

Her daughter, Lily, sees it too. "She told me, 'Mom, you should really be a televangelist,'" Stussy said, laughing. "And I was like, well, it might be a little late for that. But maybe there's some expression."

In a survey of gifts, she scored high in evangelism, she offers her definition of it. "If that means being a cheerleader for Jesus, then yeah," she said, smiling. "I'm all in."

She has begun to wonder what that expression might look like in this different era. Years ago, she and Dave spoke to audiences through radio. Today, she smiles at how many new doorways exist. Perhaps one day, her voice might travel again through something like a podcast, carrying encouragement beyond the walls of a single congregation.

She laughs when she talks about words, as if they have always been crowding the doorway.

"The average person has about 2,500 words a day," she said. "I've always had about 5,000. When I was on my own, I was lucky if I got to use 1,000. So once this opportunity opened up, I just had so much to say."

Even after loss, she moves through the world vividly. Color follows her, bright clothing, expressive



Zena Stussy, chiropractor and minister, combines decades of clinical experience with pastoral leadership.

jewelry, pink lipstick worn without apology. In rooms shaped by muted tones and quiet habits, her presence registers immediately, not because she demands attention, but because she carries life outwardly as well as inwardly.

A Life Lived Out Loud

Stussy grew up near Lake Minnetonka and graduated from Mound-Westonka High School before beginning college at Gustavus Adolphus. She later transferred to UCLA, graduating magna cum laude with a degree in communications.

Raised in the Twin Cities, she gravitated toward cities that moved fast and glowed late. Her adult

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4B



Zena Stussy and her daughter, Lily. Years before Stussy returned to ministry, she stepped away from seminary to focus on raising her daughter — a decision she says never diminished the call, only delayed it.



Zena Stussy gathers with children during a youth session at the Gran-Park-Rollag Parish, reflecting the relational approach that shaped her ministry.