

*This is the irrational season,
When love blooms bright and wild.
Had Mary been filled with reason,
There'd have been no room for the child.*

On a recent Saturday afternoon in the church lounge, Sandy Johnson was talking about her childhood when she had to excuse herself in order to discuss a church matter. "I'm sorry, she said, "Can we stop here?" After chatting briefly with a parishioner, she returned and sat down calmly, placing her hands in her lap, raising her hazel eyes and resuming her usual steady, calm demeanor. "OK, I'm back," she said.

The morning offers a glimpse of the life of a busy minister in an active congregation. After spending an hour with Johnson, you get the feeling that the delicate balance she manages took a lifetime of practice. That fact becomes evident after reading her six-page resume and 17-page ministerial profile that illustrates a life of education, motherhood, instruction, leadership, ministry and a passion for sewing and quilting.

"(Quilting and sewing) is the place I go where things get done and all the corners match," she said. "You start and finish and you have something. In ministry, nothing is very precise. You don't know where it starts and it never ends and you don't actually have a product when you're done."

An only child, Johnson was born in Albany, Georgia, where her father was the business manager of the St. Louis Cardinals' minor league baseball team; Johnson's birth was announced in the local newspaper in an article about the game.

"My father took my mother to the hospital in a team bus because they didn't have a car yet," she said. Her family then settled outside Chicago, in Arlington Heights, where Johnson graduated from high school. Following high school, Johnson attended Denison University in Granville, Ohio, where she earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in psychology. From there, she attended the University of Illinois, completing two years of graduate study in psychology. She married, moved to Seattle, where she completed a doctorate in developmental psychology from the University of Washington.

Johnson was raised a Presbyterian; however, she said her parents were not active members. "My parents sent me to Sunday school about the same way they sent me to Girl Scouts and dancing classes. ..they were not active members," she said.

While married, raising two daughters, and working part-time as an associate professor of psychology in the nursing school at the University of Washington, Johnson and her family visited a UCC congregation after her husband suffered a back injury. The family joined and Johnson made friends quickly. Just as rapidly, Johnson became active in the church.

"If you go into a church and you have two children and you are a child psychologist, you get to be a Sunday school teacher right away," she said.

Joining illustrated Johnson's propensity for leadership. From teaching Sunday school, she became a member of the Christian Education Board, chair of the board, and then vice moderator. Of her rapid rise, she said: "I sort of moved up the ranks fast."

After years of church leadership and activism, Johnson began to seriously consider the ministry following her divorce in 1986. "I had to start thinking of the long term and supporting myself," she said.

Sandy's Favorites

Bible passages:

- ***Matthew 15:21-28***
A story about a Canaanite woman who challenges Jesus
- ***The Book of Esther, in which a young woman risks all for the sake of justice***

Books:

- ***Blink by Malcolm Gladwell***

Poem:

- ***"After Annunciation" by Madeleine L'Engle***
- ***Song of Hiawatha by Henry***

Shortly thereafter, Johnson moved to Berkley, California to attend the Pacific School of Religion. In 1991, she graduated from the seminary and the same year her eldest daughter, Amanda, graduated from high school. She then moved back to Washington State where she became minister of a small church in the town of Chewelah. Like many healthy congregations in small towns, Johnson called it a "liberal outpost." Although Johnson loved the small town of 2,000, she considered herself an urbanite by nature and missed the city landscape. Therefore, after six years in Chewelah, Johnson began actively seeking a new congregation. In 1997, with three cats in tow, Johnson moved to Northfield. "I actually moved to Northfield and Minnesota came with it," she said. Northfield has been a

good match for Johnson and it allows her to be closer to her daughters Amanda Plemmons and Colleen Mitchell, and her only granddaughter, Renee. Johnson also makes regular visits to see her mother, Maryn, who lives in a retirement community in Arlington Heights.

As it turned out, the earlier interruption illustrated a great deal about Johnson. Attending local and regional church meetings, writing sermons, counseling parishioners, caring for a 84-year-old mother in another state, offering support to grown daughters (and a special four-year-old granddaughter), spending time with her partner, Jean Chagnon, and finding time for her passion, quilting, is all part of Johnson's daily dance of life.