**Debbie Lyons - 12-21-17**

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**HAS PHOTOS**

**A HEADSHOT AND ONE OF HER FROM THE PULPIT**

**Answering the call: Pastor Debbie Lyons steps into the pulpit at First United Methodist**

**By TERRY MATHEWS**

Arts/Copy Editor of ***The News***

If you ask Debbie Lyons, the new pastor at First United Methodist Church, she’s living the dream. With every ounce of her being, Lyons believes she was meant to end up here.

But, her journey to northeast Texas has been long and circuitous, and was, at first, directly tied to a convenient location.

Lyons, who has lived all over the country, was raised Catholic, but broke with the Church early on.

“I left the Catholic Church as soon as I was old enough to drive a car and drop my brothers and sisters off at catechism,” she said with a laugh during a recent interview. “Then I started dating a man who was passionate about church.”

After obtaining a degree in psychology from the University of Dayton in Ohio, she worked in hospitality and advertising.

Then, she married that man, a Presbyterian, who was passionate about church.

They had two children, Lexie and Lyssa, now 29 and 21, who Lyons wanted to raise in church.

“It just so happened that it was a Methodist church that was closest to me,” she remarked with an easy laugh.

She said at first, she didn’t look at doctrine or policy.

“It was location,” she admitted. “Had I been a little more mature in my faith back then, to know what I should be looking for, I would have chosen Methodist.”

Lyons didn’t own a Bible until she was in her late 30s because in the Catholic church of her childhood, the priest was the one “who had to know everything.”

Lyons and her young family were living in Orlando when Lyssa fell ill. The doctors didn’t know what was wrong, so they needed to run some tests. Lyons wouldn’t be allowed to be in the room with her baby during the procedures.

“I was in a Bible study at the time,” she remembered. “But, I couldn’t have found the book of John if my life depended on it.”

At the end of the Bible study, Lyons asked for prayers for her daughter.

“As I started to tell the story, I was flooded by the Holy Spirit,” she recalled. “I started bawling. These women surrounded me. In that moment, I knew God loved me. It was a remarkable moment.”

Her personal relationship with God began to grow, even as the family moved to Dallas and she went through a divorce.

She attended St. Andrew United Methodist Church in Plano, a congregation of 6,300. It was a time of great growth for both Lyons and her church.

She had felt the call to ministry in 1998, but had not shared it.

“I hadn’t told anyone,” she said. “It took me a few years to accept and understand what it meant to serve sacramentally.”

St. Andrew was building a new sanctuary but had no greeters or no invitation ministry.

“There was no system to follow up, so they asked if I would come on part time in a lay position,” she recalled.

Although she never in a million years could have envisioned herself working in a church, she agreed to help out, but only until the new sanctuary was built and they had teams in place to do what she was doing.

Then, St. Andrew asked her to go full time.

“I was building a Pampered Chef business,” she said. “There was no way I was going to do this full time.”

With her business taking off, she didn’t feel like she had the time to devote to the church.

“The executive pastor looked at me and said, ‘Debbie, when are you going to answer your call to ministry?’”

That did it. God finally had her full attention.

Lyons enrolled in a five-year course of study at Southern Methodist University. In 2006, she completed her studies and became a licensed local pastor.

According to the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry of the United Methodist Church, licensed local pastors are not ordained but are licensed to preach and conduct divine worship and perform the duties of a pastor. When appointed, the local pastor performs the usual duties of a pastor, including preaching and teaching; leading in worship and liturgy; receiving new members; performing the sacraments of baptism and The Lord’s Supper; and performing the services of marriage (where state laws allow), burial and confirmation.

“It was four weeks every summer, and it was very intense,” she explained. “Some friends had a house here and I would come out here for two weeks straight to immerse myself in studies.”

It was during that time that she fell in love with Winnsboro.

‘My friend Mary and I came to town for lunch,” she said. “Then, she drove me through the parking lot at First United Methodist Church and said, ‘Someday you’re going to be a pastor here.”

Lyons wasn’t so sure.

“I thought I was going to die in the church I raised my children in,” she said, again with a hearty laugh.

Then, in 2010, her bishop told her she was going to Caddo Mills.

“Great,” she said. “Where is Caddo Mills?”

She was going from a church with more than 6,000 members to a country church with 14 people in the congregation.

“They were the most loving, committed people,” Lyons said of her first assignment after seminary. “They were so willing to try new things and welcome new people who looked different from them. They loved people for who they were.”

The struggling church thrived under Lyons’ leadership.

They expanded the sanctuary, added an educational building and had more than 100 members when she left five weeks ago to take the reins at First United Methodist Winnsboro after the death of their pastor, Carolyn Allbritton, in October.

“I knew Carolyn from our clergy group,” Lyons said. “She was wonderful.”

In fact, Allbritton had called Lyons a couple of weeks before she died and asked her to help Dr. Vic Cassad, East District Superintendent, North Texas Conference, UMC, with her memorial service.

After the phone call, Lyons was once again led by the Spirit.

“It was overwhelmingly powerful,” she noted. “I called Vic right away and said, ‘I don’t know how to explain this, but I think I’m supposed to be in Winnsboro.’”

How could this be possible with Lyons moving things forward so well in Caddo Mills?

“I’m just telling you what the Spirit is telling me,” she told Cassad.

Four days later, Cassad called her and said, “You’re going to Winnsboro.”

Lyons was overjoyed. She sees Winnsboro as the best church in the “entire conference. I have felt a connection here.”

Lyons claims she has no magic, other than passion, energy and a love of Jesus Christ, all of which is evident after spending just a few minutes in conversation with her.

Since her arrival, she has organized several “Pies with the Pastor” events where she asks members for the input and vision for the church, which has seen declining membership in the past few years.

She’s asking questions like, “What is the community missing? What is lacking? Why aren’t people coming to church?”

With the answers she’s getting, she hopes to implement a plan to focus on solutions.

“If we can focus on something as simple as loving God and loving all others, we cannot go wrong,” she said. “The church has to be a foundation of loving people.”

So far, the congregation is loving their new leader.

Wanda Beth Noe said, “I think the world of her and she is really likeable. Her sermons are short and to the point and I think she is a good fit for our congregation, which is good after our recent loss. In other words I think she will be good for us.”

Joanna Nabors Horton agrees. “Pastor Debbie Lyons is fantastic! She is just what our family at FUMC needs!”

JaneAnne Newton said, “Debbie is bringing energy and healing back to FUMC. Her energy and joy are contagious.”

Jo Nell Newman believes “God sent Debbie to be in our life (both personal and spiritual). Her enthusiasm is just what these old bones needed.”

Sue Ragsdale said, “Her enthusiasm is contagious, and her passion in her faith is stirring a new hope and energy. Winnsboro is lucky to have her.”

Lyons’ local colleague, Chauncey Nealy agrees.

“Rev. Debbie Lyons brings to Winnsboro a tremendous energy and great enthusiasm for the life-changing ministry of the church. To meet her is to experience a welcoming smile, a hearty handshake and a caring embrace.”

Her superintendent also has high praise for Lyons.

“Debbie Lyons is a very gifted and talented pastoral leader,” Cassad said. “Her enthusiasm for the Gospel of Jesus Christ is contagious. She has been wanting to be appointed to First United Methodist Church of Winnsboro for a while, and when the opportunity came for that to be possible, it was clear to me that I wanted Debbie to be appointed there.

“She wants to be in Winnsboro and she wants to immerse herself in ministry with the church and the community. Debbie is as much a community leader as she is a church leader.

“Both the church and the community of Winnsboro will be blessed by Debbie’s presence and leadership. There is a true call of God on her life and she is a dynamic witness to the unconditional love of Jesus Christ in and for the world.”

When she started her journey to the ministry, Lyons couldn’t have known she would eventually become the pastor of a small town church, but she’s delighted to be at First United Methodist Church in Winnsboro.

“I’m the lucky one,” she said “I don’t put anything past God. If he can use me to be part of a revival, I’m happy to step up to the plate.”