ARCHIVAL SURVEY Newsletter Interview with Sue Setzer. April 21, 2022.

Sue Setzer was the wife of The Reverend Doctor Peter Setzer, Lutheran Pastor and lifelong friend to Frankie San

*Would you briefly tell me about your early life?*

At six weeks of age, I was baptized into and raised in the Lutheran church. Every time the doors of Emmanuel Lutheran in Lincolnton, NC, were open, my parents brought my two younger brothers and me. At thirteen, during vespers on the mountaintop of Camp Lutheridge, I experienced God’s call to serve in the church. Only men were ordained in 1957, so the congregation nurtured me to become a Christian educator. I could not serve as an acolyte like my brothers, but I sang in the choir and helped our Parish Worker, Janice Agner. I graduated *summa cum laude* from Queens College, Charlotte, with a degree in Bible and Religion in 1966. I was ready to apply to Princeton Theological University to prepare to teach Bible and Christian education in a college when Peter proposed to me on Christmas day my senior year. I said, “Yes!” The application was lost.

*How did you and Peter meet?*

Peter and I met at Lutheridge the summer of 1964 when he was entering his senior year at Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary and I was approaching my junior year at Queens College. I was a camp counselor with his older sister Carole, who invited him to “meet the cream of the crop of southern Lutheranism.” I must have made the cut, because he invited me to dinner that fall. We discussed the theologians we were studying and he proposed a year and a half later at Emmanuel’s altar where we were married the following July.

*What was Peter’s early life like?*

Born the son, grandson, and nephew of Lutheran ministers, Peter was the fourth of seven children. He grew up in Georgia, Tennessee, Indiana, Kentucky, Missouri, and Colorado where his father, with his mother, served Lutheran congregations. He first prepared for large animal veterinary medicine at Iowa State University. While riding his horse on the range in Brackettville, Texas, he discerned God’s call to care for God’s two-legged creatures, not the four-legged ones. He transferred to Colorado University to major in philosophy, then migrated to Columbia, SC, to enroll at LTSS. He graduated *cum laude* in 1965 and accepted a call to develop a mission congregation in Laurinburg, NC, Lutheran Church of the Living Word.

*Peter was an ordained pastor (Minister of Word and Sacrament) and you are an ordained deacon (Minister of Word and Service). What can you share about how your calls worked out together?*

By God’s grace alone, we shared fifty-four loving years of marriage while raising two children that we adopted as babies. Together, we lived out our baptismal calls and specific callings in the church, side by side.

Peter’s ministry path was straightforward. After helping the mission in Laurinburg develop roots, Peter was called to Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Gastonia, NC, in 1970 where he grew with the congregation for seventeen years. Lenoir-Rhyne College gave Peter an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree in 1987 just before he accepted a call to serve as Senior Minister at St. Mark’s Lutheran Church in Charlotte, NC. He retired in 2004 and immediately accepted interim ministry positions at Incarnation, Charlotte; Bethpage, Lincolnton; St. John’s, Statesville; Holy Cross, Boger City; and St. Matthews, Kings Mountain. [All in North Carolina.]

When Alzheimer’s disease halted his pastoral ministry, Peter focused on the care of God’s creation. He cleared trails and pulled ivy from trees at Aldersgate retirement community where we moved so he could have extended memory care. Soon known as “The Tree Man,” Peter lifted others’ spirits with his spontaneous western songs and hymns.

My path to fulfill my college vision to teach in a college was more like a spiral. First, I worked at St. Andrews Presbyterian College as an assistant, then became an active synodical volunteer as a stay-at-home mom for over a decade. In 1982, completed a Master’s at UNC-Charlotte to prepare to be certified as a Lutheran Church in America Lay Professional Leader. I worked on Holy Trinity’s staff as a part-time Youth Ministry Director for three years before becoming a curriculum writer and consultant for the Lutheran Church in America.

When Peter moved to St. Mark’s, I returned to UNC-C to become certified as a NC Licensed Professional Counselor at the Presbyterian Career and Personal Counseling Service, where I became Executive Director the last five of my fifteen years there. In 1996, Lenoir-Rhyne College gave me an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters degree.

The ELCA began a steady move toward its 2019 decision to ordain deacons. To prepare for this form of ministry, I enrolled on my fiftieth birthday in the Master of Arts in Lay Ministry degree program at Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio, and completed the program seven years later. My last call was from the NC Synod, ELCA, to direct the Supervised Ministry program and teach Christian education courses at Union Presbyterian Seminary at Charlotte. God surprised me more when I realized the seminary was then located at my alma mater, Queens College. The spiral became a circle.

*What led to your commitment to become a deacon?*

In 1957 and for decades later, the Lutheran church did not have a roster for deacons and I did not understand the meaning of diaconal ministry. When I studied about three-fold ministry (bishop, pastor, deacon) as a member of the new ELCA’s Study of Ministry Task Force, I realized that I have always been gifted for and called to the Ministry of Word and Service. Even when women could become ordained pastors in 1970, I discerned that was not my identity or path. Deacons are servant leaders who, as ministers of the church, equip the members of the body of Christ for service in the wider world. This fits me.

*How has your calling into the diaconate impacted your ministry?*

Looking back, I believe I was called into the diaconate when I was thirteen even though I didn’t know the word and the Lutheran church had not embraced it as a form of ordained ministry. From my first job in the Christianity and Culture program, I worked on behalf of the church as a called baptized member. In each position, I have served to equip people to use their given God-gifts for service in the world. Currently, I serve as a spiritual director. Knowing that I am set apart by and accountable to the Lutheran church, even in my retirement, grounds who I am and everything that I do in the historic ministry of the body of Christ.

*Could you share one of your greatest moments in ministry as a family?*

Gladly. In the mid-eighties, the house next to the parsonage became available. Peter recognized this as a ministry opportunity for the congregation to provide needed housing for a group home for cognitively challenged adults. Some neighbors, however, took the church to court to block the “dangerous” new neighbors from moving in. The judge, who providentially had a mentally impaired sister, ruled in favor of the church establishing the group home. Kind, gentle adults moved in beside us and a couple joined the church, enriching our community. When I could not find David and Joy, then about ten and thirteen, I would go next door where they were typically laughing and swinging with the neighbors on their front porch. Several years later, the Gaston County Association for Retarded Persons gave our family the Good Neighbor of the Year award. Their presence beside us was enough.

*Would you share one of our greatest challenges or most challenging times in ministry together?*

I hesitate to recount those painful years, but will in case our story sensitizes members to similar common situations that their pastors and families may face. After seventeen loving years of ministry at Holy Trinity, Gastonia, Peter received an unsolicited call to serve as Senior Minister at St. Mark’s, Charlotte. Holy Trinity had welcomed our babies and helped us raise them next door. None of us wanted to leave. Peter spent many months struggling to discern where he was most needed and finally accepted the call to shepherd a new flock in 1987.

Joy had finished the seventh grade; David, the tenth. Leaving lifelong friends in the church and community to make new ones was extremely difficult. David moved back to Gastonia to live with a friend’s generous family during his junior year, wrenching apart our family. Joy struggled to adapt to her middle year in a new junior high school. Peter invested even more pastoral hours into the larger congregation. David returned home the summer before his senior year, but our family was never the same. He died at the age of thirty-nine from an accidental overdose of alcohol and opioids. I do not believe the move caused his tragic death because he showed signs of difficulties well before the move. Now David rests in the center of God’s gracious heart, joined in 2020 by Peter.

*Your husband,, Pete,r was a close friend of Frankie San. How did you meet Frankie?*

Frankie San (Kyuzo Miyaishi) came into my life in 1966 the night before I married his former seminary roommate, Peter Setzer. Frankie bowed as he gave us a beautifully wrapped Japanese geisha doll for our wedding. Now covered in a glass box made by my father, the gift has been the focus of attention in each of our living rooms as a reminder of our lifelong friendship.

*Can you share a little more about Peter’s friendship with Frankie San?*

At six feet two inches, Peter towered over Frankie’s slender frame. They represented West and East – former cowboy and former World War II kamikaze soldier. Drawn together by their mutual love of and devotion to Jesus Christ and his ministry, the two seminary roommates enhanced each other’s faith throughout their lifetimes. They kept up an active correspondence for decades until Peter could no longer compose sentences. Frankie faithfully handwrote five or six pages, front and back, with stories of his work with prisoners and long quotations from scripture. Peter filed each one. He often invited Frankie to preach and share his prison ministry with his congregations.

Not long after our marriage, Frankie visited us in Laurinburg to preach on Sunday. He insisted that we invite a dozen people for a banquet that he would buy, prepare, and serve all by himself. I hesitantly left my new kitchen with him. As newlyweds, we had no furniture in our dining or living rooms, so we borrowed folding tables, chairs, plates, silverware, and serving utensils. Members of the church council and their spouses filled the small parsonage for a delightful feast with chopsticks and authentic Japanese cuisine. Frankie left the kitchen cleaner than he found it! The council continued to support his prison ministry financially after meeting him.

“Uncle Frankie San” later showered David and Joy with extravagant gifts and personal encouragement each time he visited. He continued the practice as great-uncle when Joy gave birth to our only grandchild named Pete in 2010. I remember hearing Peter ask Frankie once about how he could be so generous with everyone while receiving a prison staffer’s salary. Frankie quickly replied, “Peter, don’t you know that God has a bigger shovel?”