# A brief bio of Pastor Gretchen Evangeline Mertes

I was born in Madison, WI to George and Janet Weller. George is a computer engineer (retired) and Janet has her PhD in theater. My family comes from Missouri Synod Lutheran roots, with many pastors on my father’s side. I am married to Ryan Mertes, a carpenter who is currently doing construction layout and detailing for Walsh Construction. We have two kids, Advent (6) and Weller (1). They are my joy and my heart.

I grew up primarily in Grand Rapids, MI, with a brief layover in Nebraska. As a child I studied music – violin, piano, and choral singing. I also read every book I could find. For undergraduate study, I attended Valparaiso University in Indiana, graduating in 1995 with a degree in Music and Business, focusing primarily on guitar, voice, and marketing. Following college, I was with Lutheran Youth Encounter for a year of volunteer service playing music and doing youth ministry, which is when the pastoring bug bit me. After making an attempt at the music business in Chicago for a few years, I entered seminary at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, with the intention of getting an Associate in Ministry degree focusing on youth work. I was quickly persuaded that my gifts might lend themselves better to ordained ministry, and I changed my track. My internship parish was Campus Ministry in St. Louis, where I led a mission trip for 25 students to Costa Rica and Nicaragua, and started an “emergent” church service on campus at Wash U. My senior year in seminary, I worked at Grace Lutheran Church in River Forest as their interim youth director while I finished seminary.

My first call as a pastor was to Bethel Lutheran Church in Madison, WI. I served as one of nine pastors in a 6,000-member parish with a focus on senior high ministry. I took students to the national youth gathering in Atlanta (9 students), and on service trips to rural West Virginia (25 students) and urban Denver (52 students). While I was there, I assisted with starting a new worship service on Sunday evenings to appeal to college students and young adults living in downtown Madison, The band for the service, “The Pull,” recorded a few records and even won an award. I served there for 3 years. **I also started a small group called the “Square Circle” for single women (the congregation was mostly families). These ministries are still going strong.**

My second call as a pastor was to serve at St. Matthew Lutheran in Renton, WA. I was one of two, and then three pastors serving together. My primary responsibilities were music (3 bands, 2 choirs, and handbells), preaching monthly, teaching confirmation (typically 20-30 students) and leading confirmation retreats, and general pastoral care duties. I also worked on the Renton Lutheran Church Redevelopment Project, which would become the Compass Veteran’s Center in Renton, and Luther’s Table. I served there for 5 years.

While pastoring at St. Matthew, my call changed dramatically as I became involved with the inspiration and development of Luther’s Table. I became a certified Mission Developer in the ELCA, and moved to leading Luther’s Table full time as a second site of St. Matthew. I began working with architects and design teams, cadres of volunteers in many different capacities, and became the first Executive Director of the board. My passion for this “third place” ministry allowed me to invest myself fully into the grand experiment of Luther’s Table. While there, I learned swaths of new information about marketing, business, volunteer recruiting and management, fundraising, event planning, restaurants, and balancing time constraints. I also learned about poverty, homelessness, the needs of the hungry, the ravages of untreated mental illness, and how uncomfortable people of means are when they encounter the poor. I learned about the generosity of those same people when they see beyond perceived differences and hear a person’s actual name and story.

Social justice has become a growing passion in my ministry, stemming from my life-long affinity for the marginalized. I find that I gravitate toward the outcast. I’ve been very involved in civil rights, since high school where most of my friends were people of color. In college I learned about gay rights, and learned even more in seminary when I attended my first pride rally, followed closely by a rally protesting the death of Matthew Shepherd. In Madison, as a pastor, I had my first experiences working with the homeless, and began to comprehend the disaster that is poverty. With ministry at Luther’s Table including homelessness and racial reconciliation, I feel I am primed to make social justice a focus in my ministry.

Here are some highlights from my official pastor paperwork (exciting stuff, this!):

*In your public role as a leader within the congregation or organization, how would you describe your preferred approach, style and manner?*

I love ecumenical relationships, working with local non-profits, and figuring out ways to be in

conversation with non-Lutheran and non-Christian folks who are working toward the same goals

we are. In that vein, I see myself as an ambassador to people who have only heard Garrison

Keillor's version of Lutherans. I also can be a great breath of fresh air for people who think that

all Christians are tee-totaling legalist hypocritical killjoys with no sense of humor. And believe

me, the Church needs all the good PR and self-deprecating humor it can get.

*In fifty words or less, describe your vision of your calling in ministry and your passion for ministry.*

My passion is to love God, serve people, and bring people together. My heart is full of hope for

our world, our community, and our time on earth. My art is music, liturgy, humor, and grace. I

would love a position that allows me to live into all of this, and still find balance to nurture my

young family.

*What are your strengths?*

1. Talking to people with verve and passion. Helping them to tell their own stories and find their own missions. Bring out people's gifts when I find them. Kind of like life-coaching, unwinding the knots that people tie themselves into.

2. Music. Not only music, but welcoming and appreciating all different kinds of musicians. Creating community around music, and helping music to be a tool that builds relationships as well as are. Writing, organizing, planning, and developing musical environments and settings that are ideal for whatever event is in order. Writing songs to fit certain needs/events/moods.

3. Getting things rolling, trying new things, getting stuff started. I learn by doing, and I plan well on the fly. I have ideas, and they are good and strong.

4. Social networks, knowing and connecting people. I love nothing more than helping people find each other professionally, personally, romantically, familially, in all ways. I love love love connecting people!