

Called to Serve, Called to Love: Matt & Cara Johnson

For Matt and Cara Johnson, recent changes have been a bit life-altering.

Change. A new marriage (as of June 28) of a dog-loving, widowed, empty-nester and a not-so-dog-crazy bachelor. New career paths. A new home in South Bend's inner city, coming from rural southern Ohio.

Yet, in some ways, it's not so much of a change at all. After all, they have known each other most of their lives and were "boyfriend and girlfriend" in middle school and early high school. Growing up in small communities north of Grand Rapids, their lives were intertwined with each other's families.

"Matt is my oldest friend," Cara says, adding, "We have stayed friends all these years. I looked back at some of my old journals, and I had written, 'I love Matt Johnson.' But teenage relationships change, and the two went their separate ways. Cara met and married Jamey Gremillion; they had four children, Cameron, Cade, Kelcie, and Karis. Jamey was a Methodist pastor before becoming a college professor.

Matt's and Cara's lives took them in different directions—she to Idaho, North Carolina, West Virginia, and Mississippi, while Matt lived in Michigan, Mississippi, and Alaska. However, both were part of a core group of friends who had attended college and seminaries together and often met up over the years. Furthermore, they usually connected when back in Michigan, visiting their respective parents.

At one point, one of Matt's friends living in Alaska encouraged him to move there. Matt wasn't sold on the idea. "At first I said, 'Tom, I don't want to live in Alaska,' then I said, 'Ok, get me a job, and I'll come,'" Matt recalls. He initially worked in construction, then pastored a small church while working at a bank. Chuckling, he says, "I've done a little bit of everything—roofing, landscaping, security, social services, banking, government."

Through the bank, he became acquainted with a state legislator who introduced him to the world of government work. Matt joined the professional staff of the Alaska State Legislature. After spending more than 10 years in Alaska, much of it in government or government-related work, he returned to the ministry. In 2019, he relocated to northwest Ohio to serve as a pastor at a church.

At Ohio Christian University in Circleville, Ohio, several of their network of friends had found positions, including Jamey as a professor. The president had been one of Matt's mentors in seminary and offered him the position of vice president for strategic development.

Meanwhile, Cara was raising four children and teaching high school English. In 2023, Jamey was diagnosed with stage 4 colon cancer and died 10 months later.

A longtime core of friends, including Matt, surrounded Cara with love and support. He was also part of a Bible study that met at Cara's house. Then there was football.

"I didn't have a TV at my house, and Cara would invite me over to watch football. We'd spend hours together on Saturdays," Matt explains.

"It started with football, then we'd get into all these discussions ..." Cara says, before Matt continues the thought, "We loved to discuss ideas and had common interests—music, poetry, books, religion, Michigan football."

Then their relationship began to blossom. After Cara's youngest child, Karis, left for college, she found herself totally alone for the first time in 50 years. "I wasn't scared, but it was lonely. I lived in a farmhouse in the country, and I just had my two dogs (Boone and Tally). We started seeing more and more of each other and would have these hours-long conversations," she says, grinning across the table at him. "We're still like...what just happened. I'm still surprised."

In May, as they began planning their wedding, Matt realized he was feeling the call to pastoral ministry again. He had attended an alumni meeting of former seminary students, which inspired his thinking to return to ministry. He happened to look at a seminary job board and saw a posting for a church in South Bend.

After discussing it with Cara and agreeing that both wanted to be closer to their parents in Michigan, Matt submitted his application to St. Paul's Memorial Church. The beautiful, historic church, built by Clement Studebaker in 1903, is a United Methodist Church. In 2020, it disaffiliated from the Methodist Church, eager to chart its own course. For the first time, it found itself searching for a pastor rather than having one assigned.

A search committee had been interviewing candidates for nearly a year when Matt's resume came in.

"It was almost like he was too good to be true," comments Tom Cooper, chairman of the search committee. "St. Paul's was looking for a new beginning, with someone with innovation, energy, and vision. We feel fortunate to have this team of Matt and Cara; both bring us that opportunity. They have a new beginning, and St. Paul's has a new beginning."

Neither are strangers to the pastoral life, having been steeped in it through their families. Both of Cara's grandfathers and one of Matt's grandfathers were pastors in the same Michigan conference. And, of course, Cara's late husband had been a pastor. Their fathers and her mother grew up together, and all four parents later sang together in a college choir.

Once in South Bend, Cara found a position teaching fourth grade at Marshall Elementary School, a new age group for her, but one she finds delightful.

As they settle into their new home, they hear sirens and traffic and trains, where they'd been accustomed to silence. The sounds of change. "I'd say we've hit all the huge ones as far as stress goes," Matt reflects. "It's all good if it doesn't get any worse than this."

They enjoy looking back over Cara's journal. "We broke up when we were 14; it was a mutual thing," Cara says. "But I wrote in my journal: Someday, after I see the good in this (break-up), I'll come back and write the finish to this story."

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BY BECKY EMMONS