

[https://www.telegraphherald.com/news/features/article\\_5769de29-ac5a-5539-971a-eec85b1fb5ea.html](https://www.telegraphherald.com/news/features/article_5769de29-ac5a-5539-971a-eec85b1fb5ea.html)

# The barefoot preacher: Rev. Overstreet takes the helm at Westminster

BY MICHELLE LONDON [michelle.london@thmedia.com](mailto:michelle.london@thmedia.com)

Jan 15, 2022



The Rev. MargaretAnne Overstreet is the first female pastor at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Dubuque, assuming the

Photo by: JESSICA REILLY Telegraph Herald

Westminster Presbyterian Church's new pastor preaches in her bare feet and delivers her sermons wearing street clothes.

"But really, that is the least interesting thing about me," Rev. MargaretAnne Overstreet said.

She is a single mother by choice to seven-year-old Mollie, and is the first female pastor in the 171-year history of the Dubuque church.

It was her unique style and enthusiasm that impressed the Session, a nine-member elected board of the church, to hire Overstreet, who assumed her new post in July.

“We determined she was an absolutely great fit to serve as our pastor,” Session moderator Tom Stovall said. “Her background, skills and experiences, and her style of pastorship are just what we felt we were looking for.”

Growing up in the southern Illinois town of Harrisburg, Overstreet, 48, had a tight-knit family whose members were always involved in church, but she never considered a career as a pastor.

“Being a minister was never on my radar,” she said. “Youth ministry, or some kind of ministry, was kind of always my side gig. I never looked at it as a profession.”

She majored in communications and public relations in college, then worked a series of jobs that included newswriting, graphic design, event planning and fundraising.

"I was exploring, trying to figure out what the right thing for me was, what my calling was," she said.

That calling came through a couple of conversations that happened in quick succession.

“I spent a week at a camp where they brought in ministry leaders and let them lead all the programs,” she said. “A pastor said to me, ‘You have a real gift for telling stories and interpreting the Scriptures.’ I was like, OK, that’s nice to hear. But it just kind of went by the wayside.”

But a second conversation when she gave notice at the church where she worked had her rethinking that compliment.



“I said to the pastor, ‘I think it's time for me to do something different. I don't know what the next step is, but I think it's time to wind this down,’” she said. “And she asked me if I was going to seminary. I said, ‘No, why would you say such a crazy thing?’”

The pastor told her to think about it.

“So, that started the ball rolling,” Overstreet, who has now been a pastor for 15 years, said.

Just as she may not have foreseen that career move, she also never expected her barefoot preaching style to become a weekly fixture.

“When I originally started, it was just for Advent,” Overstreet said. “What I said to my congregation at the time was when Jesus was born, God came into creation, and in a way that was different than God just kind of doing something with creation. He made it holy in a whole new way. If we're going to take that seriously, then we ought to walk around with our shoes off because when Moses came to the burning bush, God said, ‘Take your shoes off, this is holy ground.’”

When the sermon series ended, Overstreet found it difficult to end the practice.

“It just didn't feel right to me,” she said. “That preaching moment is deeply holy. I felt it was appropriate to take my shoes off in reverence to that moment, and to remind me of my own humility.”

Overstreet is modest about the unique way she preaches and the attention it attracts.

“I'm at best a back-up singer for what God is doing,” she said.

As God's “back-up singer,” Overstreet also has lots of ideas for the direction of Westminster's ministry, and it was that enthusiasm that impressed the Session.



“If there was any one factor that sold us on her it was her dynamic and inspired preaching,” Stovall said. “We thought she would bring a refreshing new style of ministry and leadership to our congregation.”

Overstreet said collaboration will be the key to the church's future success.

“When a pastor comes in, if you create a cult of personality and everything’s built around the ideas and charisma of this new pastor, it doesn’t stay,” she said. “Then there’s this kind of crash when that pastor leaves. So we are trying to discern the gifts of the whole.”

The Westminster campus is home to a community garden and a Head Start program, both of which ignite two of Overstreet’s passions -- sustainable agriculture and children.

“Parenting is the hardest thing I’ve ever done,” she said. “In the midst of COVID, it’s excruciatingly hard for parents. Balancing work and family is hard enough, much less having to do it during a pandemic. I'm very privileged that this congregation surrounds me as a single parent.”

Overstreet said that when she and daughter Mollie first moved to Dubuque, school was virtual. She felt fortunate to have the flexibility to bring her daughter to work.

“She went to school right beside me every day,” she said. “A lot of parents don’t have that privilege. As a pastor, I’m also head of staff, and I want to be the kind of boss that says, ‘Do what you need to do to make it work.’”

Overstreet said her ideas about being a parent have changed dramatically since Mollie came along.

“They say it takes a village to raise kids. I believe that much more now than I did seven years ago,” she said. “I would love to see us be the grandparents of the community. How can we help parents who don't have their parents nearby, or who aren't close to family or who don't have extra



help? And I'm not talking about just giving them a bag of groceries. I'm talking about really getting in their lives and saying, 'How can we help?'"

Overstreet said one of the things she loves about the Presbyterian Church is the ability of its members to agree to disagree.

"It's the kind of place where people can disagree and still love each other at the end of the day," she said. "Sadly, I don't think that's a terribly common thing anymore."

Overstreet said she would like Westminster to be known in the community as a place where people feel welcome and can talk about hard issues in a safe space.

"I disagree with you and you disagree with me. Now let's have a cup of coffee together. And donuts. Because coffee and donuts, right?," she said. "Wow, if we can do that and be in the world, that's the grace of God. You know what I mean?"

