

Pastor: 'I could just be myself'

Ken Roth tells of his roundabout path to Sharon United Methodist Church

Katharine Dale

kdale@charlotteobserver.com

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After college, Ken Roth, senior pastor of Sharon United Methodist Church, didn't exactly have ministry in mind.

"It was absolutely the last thing on earth I wanted to do," he said.

For one, he wasn't smitten with the idea of working in a church. And he was terrified of preaching.

Still, over the years, the lifelong Christian couldn't escape the idea.

Then one day emerged a life-changing epiphany: "I realized I didn't have to become a minister – I already was one," he said. "I didn't have to go into a church and be what everyone else wanted me to be. I could just be myself."

Today, Roth, 65, calls ministering his joy.

Roth grew up in Rockford, Ill. After graduating in 1965 from Drake University in Des Moines – with degrees in philosophy, psychology and sociology - he couldn't decide on a vocation.

At that point, scratching clergy from his list of possible careers, he settled on missionary work. The mission plans lingered longer than expected, though, and in the meantime he was "very draftable" for the war, he said.

Knowing he had to act fast, Roth took a position as a minister's assistant in northern Illinois. The position pushed him face-to-face every Sunday with his biggest fear: preaching.

"It scared me to death," he said. "I had no idea what I was doing. My first sermon was an illustration of (the TV show) 'Father Knows Best.' It was ludicrous what I was doing. But the people were very gracious."

Months later, the mission plans still hadn't panned out. So he enrolled at Garrett Theological Seminary on the campus of Northwestern University.

While in seminary he became a youth pastor and got married. He and his bride, Linda, who was from Monroe, later moved to the Salisbury area. Roth got a job in crisis ministry - still intending to steer clear of the pulpit.

"Preaching frightened me, getting up in front of crowds and speaking," he said.

He then went into clinical pastor education in Richmond, Virginia, learning how to use his spiritual gifts on behalf of hospital patients.

It was during that time the epiphany came. He was appointed pastor at St. Timothy United Methodist in Brevard.

"The preaching still scared me, but I could handle that," he said. "I worked and worked and worked ... A small church like that grows preachers."

He later became an associate pastor in Greensboro for nine years, before heading up Huntersville UMC in 1988. Four years later he was sent to a church in Cokesbury. There, he decided to do dialogue during sermons over lent.

"I was very open to asking questions and getting responses," he said. "I loved that."

Before long, initiating dialogue during sermons became his preaching style. And when he moved to the SouthPark area church in 2001, he brought a style that set him apart.

During the 11:15 a.m. traditional service, he's up in the chancel. In the 9 a.m. service he roams the floor.

"People respond," he said. "There are a few who don't like that (style). But that's just who I am. And that's made preaching a joy."

The best part of his role: People, he said. "I really enjoy people, and feel honored beyond all measure to get very real with people in a way you don't get to outside (clergy roles)....My passion is to grow and really get connected with the life that's inside them, the spirit."

The most challenging part: Administration. "You ought to see my desk right now, it's piled," he said.

Away from the church, Roth enjoys photography and music - from Mozart and bluegrass to Bruce Springsteen and Billy Joel. And he tries to play some golf when he can.

He and Linda have two sons, Daniel and Mike. The couple will celebrate their 41st anniversary Sept. 2.

The most important thing he does: "Encourage people to trust the person God created when God created them. To encourage us to let loose and risk ourselves to see what God will do through us."