



Another step in a
life of adventure,
—welcoming
our new dean

The Rev. Canon Beth Bretzlaff Joins Us As We All Venture Into An Unknown World

By J.B. Coutts

Canon Beth Bretzlaff loves adventure. As an outdoor enthusiast, exploring new places and trying new things brings her joy. Still, she's finding her next adventure—starting her job as dean of Christ Church Cathedral in the middle of a pandemic—a little daunting.

"Everything I know how to do is in person," she said in a recent interview. "Really, my work has always been in person. Over a cup of coffee, by a hospital bed, in the pulpit."

Normally, starting at a new church, she noted, you expect a big turnout on your first Sunday, everyone curious to see the new priest.

That, of course, can't happen. September 6 will see no more than 50 people permitted in the congregation, everyone wearing masks, no greetings at the end of the service, no gathering to talk to friends indoors or out. The new dean in the pulpit will be just one strange aspect of a very strange day.

"We're definitely all going to be learning together," Canon Beth said. Although she described herself as "flummoxed" at the prospect of the change in this interview, she projected calm confidence and lived up to her self-description of being direct and plain spoken.

We agreed in our interview this article would just give biographical notes, the equivalent of a first-Sunday glimpse of the new priest; a more detailed piece will follow in the Thanksgiving edition of *Ex Cathedra*.

Beth Bretzlaff was the third of three children and only girl born to Marion (a teacher) and Carmen Bretzlaff, who had a dairy farm outside of Shawville until she finished grade 6, when she and her parents moved into Shawville because her father's heart problems were making the farm too much for him (one brother took it over). The family attended St. Paul's in Shawville and Beth has a memory, as a child, of watching the priest and thinking that would be a really cool job to have, being with people at all the important times of their lives—but without any expectation of that happening, because women weren't being ordained at the time.

By the time she was in high school, however, that had changed and people in the congregation were starting to suggest to her she should be a priest. As a result, at the age of 17, she found herself being interviewed by then-bishop Edwin Lackey to determine whether she had a vocation. Bishop Lackey felt she did, and from then on he kept an eye on her.

For her part, Beth filed the idea away for 10 years ("I wanted to avoid it") and began her adventures by leaving home for school—first to CEGEP in Montreal, then to the University of Ottawa for a BA in psychology.

After graduation, she headed to Calgary, looking for adventure. She worked in retail and an engineering office—but Bishop Lackey hadn't forgotten about her and wrote asking her to attend a vocational conference in Montreal. She went.

The next step was theological college in Vancouver, where she met the bishop of Kootenay, who told her she should call him. When she said 'You probably say that to all the students,' he said no, he didn't. She wrote to tell Bishop Lackey she wanted to stay in B.C. His answer was it didn't matter where she was, she was being ordained for the whole church—and she would come back to Ottawa one day. Sadly, he died just before she became a priest.

Beth expected to start her priesthood in a small rural parish but instead spent eight and a half years at the Cathedral of St. Michael and All Angels, first as a curate for two years, and then as priest-assistant (the equivalent of our vicar). After that, she worked for a publisher, Wood Lake Books, for a spell. Not long after

moving to Kelowna, she had married another priest in the diocese and together they moved to New Zealand in 2004.

"Every job I've ever had is the best job in the world," Canon Beth said in our interview, and the jobs she held in New Zealand qualified. She started as the child, youth and family educator for the Diocese of Dunedin, travelling through beautiful country from parish to parish. After that, she again tried something new, studying for a post-graduate diploma in Community and Social Work from Otago University and working with teenagers caught in the justice system. Her marriage and her time in New Zealand came to an end when her baby girl Hannah, born with a heart defect, died when she was just two weeks old (on the other side of the world, Beth's father died the same week). Beth returned to Canada, alone.

Not sure what would happen next, she headed back to Kelowna, but after a visit east to see her mother who was growing frail, she decided perhaps she should look for work in the Diocese of Ottawa. She soon saw an advertisement for another best job in the world—to be chaplain at Ottawa's Ashbury College. She had always wanted to be an Anglican chaplain and she loved working with teenagers. "That's my job," she thought.

But just over two years later, another job opened up. The Church of St. John the Evangelist on Elgin Street needed a priest; people kept telling Beth to apply but she didn't want the change. "Why would I do that?" was her standard reply.

Eventually, however, she heard from so many people she began to think perhaps she was being called. Reluctantly, she went to an interview. She left it sure she was being called to the new ministry. It was a difficult transition, for her and for the parish; there were several stressful years before it qualified for the best-job-in-the-world club. "It was a wild ride for seven years, and now I'm coming here," she said. And we're all going on Canon Beth's next adventure with her.