



## ***Connecting Through Faith: A Bethlehem Valentine's Story***

By: Bruce Pokarney



Growing up in Aberdeen, Zach Drees and Annie Hagen didn't run in the same circles despite being the same age. Their parents knew each other, but Zach and Annie went to different elementary schools and didn't really pay much attention to one another despite the families attending the same church. Then, something divine happened: through Bethlehem, the couple, as teenagers, got to know each other well—so well that today they are married with two young children. With the arrival of Valentine's Day 2026, Zach and Annie Drees are a reminder that the personal connections

made at Bethlehem can sometimes lead to a forever relationship with someone special.

Annie is pretty sure she first crossed paths with Zach in Sunday School.

“There is a picture of us doing the nativity scene back in probably 1996,” she says. “We were never really friends or anything like that, but we had church in common. If we didn't have Bethlehem in common, maybe we would have never come together.”

Zach says a lot happened between Sunday School and late high school when he first asked Annie out on a date.

“Annie's dad [Scott Hagen] was our confirmation leader, so I was indirectly involved with her, but I don't think she had much to do with me at that time. We then did peer ministry together. I think Annie and I truly kicked it off during our trip to New Orleans for the National Youth Gathering while we were in high school.”

Under the guidance of Bethlehem’s Denny Smook, Director of Youth Ministries at the time, both Zach and Annie continued their faith journey post-confirmation through peer ministry—a faith-based ministry that trains young people to provide pastoral care, support, and leadership to their peers. That trip to New Orleans involved a 26-hour bus ride and a project a couple of years after Hurricane Katrina devastated the area.

“We all complained that the South Dakota Synod had the worst job,” recalls Annie. “We had to clean up a park. We cleared thorny weeds. We created a trail that didn’t exist before. It was a grueling day, but we shared a common experience and worked hard.”

The peer ministry brought the couple closer in Aberdeen as well. The small group of students met every week, got additional training, and gave assistance when needed. The group provided support to students following the suicide of a classmate at Aberdeen Central High School. Zach and Annie were also involved in “Table Talks,” a collaborative ELCA lunchtime ministry focused on faith and fellowship.

Zach and Annie naturally began to date after being drawn together by church activities. They were married at Bethlehem in 2014, and now the family includes Zelda, 5, and Sevro, 3. Annie is a teacher at Simmons Middle School, and Zach is an IT specialist at Marco Technologies. The Drees recently returned to Aberdeen after 10 years in Watertown, a decade during which they missed Bethlehem.



“Finding a church that made us feel as comfortable as we were while growing up was a hard task,” says Annie. **“So when we had the opportunity to come back home to Bethlehem, it was like putting on an old pair of shoes. It’s a natural fit.”**

Zach & Annie  
Drees children:  
Zelda (5) and  
Sevro (3)

The kids are involved in Bethlehem’s Pre-K ministry, and the entire family enjoys the Wednesday night worship service.

The Drees have some advice to anyone looking at Bethlehem as a way to meet people.

**“Get involved, because you never know who you are going to meet,”** says Annie. “Do youth group, do bible study, make those connections.”

It’s not the church’s mission to be a matchmaker, but it’s not unusual for people to find friendship, companionship, and possibly a lot more as they grow in their faith with others who worship, learn, and serve in the welcoming environment of Bethlehem.

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*Thank you for being a vital part of Bethlehem and for your support. With your partnership and the power of the Holy Spirit, Bethlehem is touching lives each and every day – connecting us with God, one another, and our mission in the world.*



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