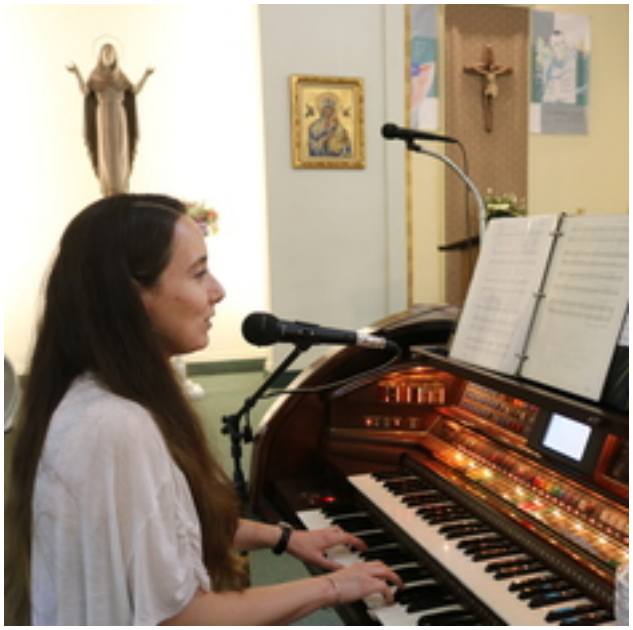

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BY SUSAN BAILEY | CFP CORRESPONDENT

Patrice Metcalf came full circle in her journey to becoming the music director of St. Anne and St. Patrick Parish in Sturbridge: She grew up in the parish. After majoring in music at Westfield State University, Ms. Metcalf applied for the position, but not without some hesitation.

“After graduating from Westfield, I actually took on a job as a music director at another church in western Massachusetts,” Ms. Metcalf said. “I didn’t really feel like I fit in with the church so I did have my eyes open for other job opportunities.

“Then I found out that St. Anne’s was hiring. I put off applying because I thought it might be kind of silly for me to apply to the church that I had grown up at; I felt uncomfortable. After a while they weren’t hiring anyone, so I went ahead and applied, and it worked out.”

She has been serving as music director there since October 2019, but began singing at the parish when she was a sophomore in high school.

“I became a cantor when I was 16,” she said. “I also joined the adult choir. I continued to sing on a volunteer basis at the parish for weekends and holidays until I went to college. During college I would occasionally sing during my winter and summer breaks.”

Ms. Metcalf discovered, as a student at Tantasqua Regional High School, she enjoyed singing and creating music in many different ways. A soprano, she was a member of the regular chorus plus the Choraleers, an a capella group. She was also a member of the Treblemakers Jazz Ensemble.

She wanted to major in music in college but also felt a desire for something else.

“I had this yearning of wanting to be in charge of music ministry in some way,” she said. “So even going into college, I remember being interviewed for something on campus and they asked me what I wanted to be and I said, ‘I want to be a social worker and a church music director.’ I gave up on the social worker path.”

Faith has always been important to Ms. Metcalf, fueling her desire to become involved with sacred music. It was during confirmation formation that she realized how she could combine sharing her love of God with her passion for music.

“During my confirmation process, my sponsor (her sister, Kelly Pate) and I discussed how I could use my talents as either a musician or simply as an empathetic person to serve my faith,” she said. She explored the possibility of becoming a music teacher or a social worker. “I started thinking that if I went into music ministry, that’s my way that I can show my faith,” she said.

The Steubenville East youth conference in Rhode Island in 2009 was the pivotal moment of her faith formation, she said.

“My weekend there helped me realize a deeper connection I had with Christ, and at the same time I developed a newfound confidence in my identity.”

Her preparation for leading a music ministry came from her education at Westfield State University, plus practical on-the-job experience.

“My job at First Congregational (Church of Westfield) gave me hands-on experience,” she said. “Other than that, the music curriculum at Westfield State teaches skills to all their music students to be leaders in the music field as directors and teachers.” Coursework included choral conducting, sight singing, advanced music theory, music history and music ensembles. “I chose to be a part of chorus, chamber choir, musical and opera productions and piano ensemble,” she said.

Before the pandemic, Ms. Metcalf managed volunteer cantors and directed two groups – an adult choir and a contemporary group at St. Anne and St. Patrick. Both groups have been put on hold, but Ms. Metcalf makes it a point to keep in touch with those involved.

“Until we can work together again, I send weekly emails to my choir members with music-themed journal prompts and listening activities to encourage them to develop an emotional connection with music during this time away. Most of the choir members are very appreciative of these activities,” she said.

St. Anne Shrine, run by the Assumptionists on the grounds of St. Anne-St. Patrick, offers unique opportunities for the celebration of Mass outdoors during the COVID-19 pandemic. Along with the small church, there is a large outdoor pavilion where Masses are held during the summer. During the colder months Masses are celebrated in the St. Joachim Parish Center. Ms. Metcalf has been playing the electric piano for the outdoor Masses and leads the singing, which, at this time, is restricted to acclamations only.

An accomplished pianist, Ms. Metcalf has taught herself how to play the organ, which requires the mastery of many different elements, including two registers and foot pedals.

“The coordination comes naturally, but to an extent,” she said. “When it comes to the pedals though, that’s still something that I am working on.”

She devotes an hour a day to practice on the piano and tries to work on her organ skills at least once a week in preparation for the time when Mass moves indoors.

In July, Ms. Metcalf led the music for the annual Novena to Saint Anne, in its 133rd year.

“Each night for nine days there was a 7 p.m. Mass in the pavilion,” she said. “We currently have four volunteer cantors at the parish and each of them got to sing at two Masses during that nine-day period. I chose the songs that went well with the liturgy but that also highlighted each cantor’s individual voice and style.”

She also used her composition skills to create original melodies and accompaniment for several of the Psalms, the Gospel acclamation and for one of the readings (Jeremiah 31).

Her job at St. Anne and St. Patrick’s is a “dream come true,” she said. “I had such a strong connection with this parish my whole life, so to be given this opportunity to work here felt amazing.”