

## **“My Spiritual Autobiography”**

By Children & Youth Pastor Tiffany Bidwell      Preached on July 4, 2010

For those of you who were not here last week, I am Pastor Tiffany Bidwell, the new children and youth pastor here at St. Paul United Methodist Church. When Pastor Chuck asked me to preach today since he is on vacation, I thought that this would be the perfect time to share with you my spiritual autobiography. Since you've only known me for two weeks of my journey of faith, I thought you may want to know a bit more about me since you have entrusted me with the responsibility of being your children and youth pastor.

So where do I start? I guess it's best to start at the beginning. I entered the family of Christ on November 4, 1984 through my baptism at Landenberg United Methodist Church. I worshipped in this church until I was 17 years old, so this place is where my faith took root. I regularly attended Sunday School growing up, so the church was largely responsible for my Christian foundations. However, being raised in a Christian home also influenced my beliefs as a young child. Prayer was a regular part of my daily life, as evident in this picture which was taken when I was four years old.

Although a participant in church life throughout my childhood years due to the commitment of my parents, once I was confirmed at the age of thirteen, this was when I truly saw myself as a Christian, taking ownership of my faith. On that day, Pastor Kevin Readman gave me an index card with a piece of scripture picked especially for me. This verse rang true for me then, and it is still at the core of my ministry today. It was 1 Timothy 4:12-13, which reads, “Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith, and in purity. Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching.” I took this message to heart,

becoming involved in the ministry of Landenberg UMC. As a young adolescent, I realized my gift and passion for children's ministry. I coordinated music at Vacation Bible School, directed two Christmas pageants, and worked with children as both a nursery attendant and a Junior Church instructor. My faith developed through active membership in youth group, and I represented the youth of the church as I served on the Administrative Council for two years.

As a teenager, I also started to use my musical gifts in the worship setting. I played the piano and French horn for special music on occasion, but my regular venue was as a vocalist in our youth praise band, "The Master's Musicians." We led the congregation in song, accompanied by a keyboard player, guitarist, and drummer. As a member of this group, I learned that my singing was not a performance; it was an act of worship.

While Landenberg UMC provided the primary source of my faith development, I also grew spiritually during my time at Gretna Glen, a Methodist camp in Lebanon. For four years, I attended Music & Drama Camp at Gretna. These years at camp affected my understanding of what it truly means to be the body of Christ. The community of Christians, campers and counselors alike, became such a tight-knit group that we even gathered together throughout the year to reunite and catch up on each other's lives. This group cared for each other, supported one another in life's trials and tribulations, and engaged in true fellowship. I learned a lot from being a camper at Gretna Glen. Forming relationships with other Christians is still a key part of my life, something I may not have valued as much without seeing its importance as a teenager.

During my senior year of high school, my family transferred our membership to Avondale Presbyterian Church. Not one to "let the grass grow under my feet," I quickly became involved in the music and children's ministry at my new church. I played in the handbell choir and sang in the senior choir. In 2005, I started a children's choir at the church, fulfilling a need

that parents had been requesting for years. As at Landenberg UMC, I also taught Junior Church and was a member of the youth ministry team, leading a small group Bible study for middle school girls.

Although happy in my ministry at Avondale Presbyterian for four years, there were times when my theology did not coincide with Presbyterian doctrine, making me occasionally uncomfortable in worship and in supporting some of the missions of the congregation.

Therefore, when my mom took a job as director of music at St. James Episcopal Church in November 2006, I was content with making this transition with my family, keeping us together in worship as well as allowing me to leave my disagreements with the Presbyterian Church behind me. At St. James, I picked up where I left off at Avondale, starting a children's choir within the first month of attending the church. My first project was the annual Christmas pageant. However, directing this pageant was not easy. St. James is located right outside of Wilmington, Delaware in the suburb of Newport. Many members of this congregation were the definition of "at-risk." Kids came from single-parent homes with low socioeconomic status, which often lead to church not being a priority. Therefore, attendance varied each week at rehearsals, worrying a "Type A" person like me who loves to organize with time to spare. How was this pageant going to come together by Christmas Eve? Did I expect too much out of this congregation with less than two months?

On the Saturday before the pageant, I held a dress rehearsal. What was I thinking? Now I was asking these families to take a chunk of their Saturday morning in addition to Sunday. Yet this practice was evidence of God's goodness. Over a dozen children came and the practice went so well, it was over in less than two hours. What a mighty God we serve!

On Christmas Eve, fifteen children participated in the pageant. The pageant was well-received by the congregation, which was a blessing in itself because the older members never thought these kids were capable of anything close to this magnitude.

Most importantly, this pageant lit the fire within me for children's ministry. If I could pull together something this great in two months, imagine what I could do with more time! I had never before felt God speak to me as directly as He did on this day. I couldn't think of anything besides how I should minister to children as my vocation.

But how could I give more time, I thought to myself... I was a first-year teacher. God couldn't want me to give up my job. I'd wanted to be a teacher since eighth grade; this must be what God really wanted me to do. It was these thoughts that caused my revelation to soon fade after Christmas Eve, bringing my focus back to teaching.

As the school year progressed, God remained persistent. In early May, He started to prod me again to do more with my children's ministry. Being a choir director is great, but there are other ways for kids to learn about their faith. I questioned God, telling Him that I was not trained for such a job. Sure, youth directors are hired who only have education degrees or previous experience with young people, but I wanted to be more prepared than that. My Bible knowledge was so limited...how could I take on a leadership role within a church with such an incomplete understanding of scripture? And besides, I had spent the last four years studying to become a teacher. God had been calling me to teach ever since I could remember playing school with my dolls as a young girl...don't You remember, God?

Then one night, the doubts subsided and God answered my questions. If you don't feel educated enough, why don't you go back to school and study the Bible, fill in those gaps that are making you resist My call? I started searching online for local seminaries. I knew a professor at

Princeton Theological Seminary, but their admission was already closed. The only other school I knew of in the area was Lancaster Theological Seminary, the school where my former pastor from Landenberg, Kevin, was getting his doctorate. When I viewed their webpage, the admission deadline was in just over a week. Although I hesitated to apply due to the limited amount of time, I also realized that I would be miserable teaching the following school year if I did not even try to apply. So I quickly gathered the required materials, wrote a biographical essay, and asked a colleague at school to write a recommendation, keeping quiet in case I did not get in and would be working at the same school the following year.

About a month later, I received notification from LTS that I had been admitted into the Masters of Divinity program and would start in September. I was so excited; I felt this admission was a final affirmation of my call. Although it was difficult to leave my teaching position, the administration and staff were very supportive, seeing my year of teaching as a stepping stone to something better. I told the principal that I was still going to be teaching, I just had a different curriculum...and this one doesn't require any standardized testing!

Throughout my studies at LTS, my gifts for ministry were affirmed in both my coursework and my involvement in other activities on campus. My Bible knowledge greatly increased, leading me to read parts of the Bible I never knew existed before. I also worked for Leadership Now, the youth ministry program on campus that coordinated events throughout the year to help teenagers grow in their faith. The diversity of the student body at LTS opened my eyes to a wide range of theological viewpoints while also helping me articulate and formulate my own beliefs. While in school, I served as student pastor at Parkesburg UMC in Chester County. At this church, I directed musicals for children and the youth group. I also experienced the various aspects of pastoral ministry such as providing pastoral care, leading worship, and

teaching Bible study. This was a great environment to apply the skills I was learning in the classroom. While in seminary, I also started my process toward ordination. I will hopefully become ordained next May as a deacon in the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference of the UMC.

So, now God has led me to serve here at St. Paul UMC. I have waited over three years to pursue my call, so I am very excited to finally have the opportunity to serve full-time in the areas of children and youth ministry. As I wrote in my newsletter article, I look forward to working with the entire church as we support the faith development of our youngest members. Not only are they the future of the church, but they are also disciples of Christ right now who need guidance and education as they form their spiritual identities. I am very interested in what your ideas are for the ministry of our young people and how I can help the families of this church, so please contact me via e-mail, phone, or by setting up a time to meet in my office here to share your input. I want to meet you and I highly value your input.

So, what does my story mean for you? Well, a key conviction of the United Methodist Church is that all persons in Christ are called to work for the building up of the church through worship, fellowship, and service to the world. What ministry is God calling you to do today? Are you in a tug of war with God, doubting that He is calling you to leave your comfort zone and pursue His work? Leaving your comfort zone may not mean quitting your job and going to seminary like I did...although it might, and any member of the pastoral team would love to speak with you about that if it is. However, God has given each and every one of us unique gifts to use for His service. We should not let our gifts sit docile and remain unused. Sometimes, we just need to take a step of faith and say “Yes” to God’s call. Amen.