

Journey



Faith at Work

Myers Park
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



For we are God's
handiwork, created
in Christ Jesus to do
good works, which
God prepared in
advance for us to do.

– Ephesians 2:10

What Do You Do?

“Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called...” – Ephesians 4:1

What do you do? What do you want to be when you grow up? Where do you want to go to college? We frequently pose these questions to each other about our work or plans for the future. But how often do we ask, “What’s your calling?” It’s a very different question.

Those typical icebreaker questions are centered on ourselves: our wants, interests, and desires. However, when we ask, “What’s your calling?”, we focus on what *God* is calling us to do.

In this issue of *Journey*, we explore the many ways people discern and respond to God’s call in their lives. Look at the table of contents on the facing page and you’ll get a glimpse of how broadly and widely God calls us!

What might God be calling *you* to do? The writer of Ephesians encourages us all to lead a life worthy of the calling to which we’ve been called. Interestingly, the “you” there is not singular, it’s plural. We share a common calling to live into God’s vision for the world, defined by the kingdom of God. We each have a role to play in this common calling.

So, what is your calling? How might you reframe your life through the lens of that question? In answering your call, you will find life’s deepest meaning and highest purpose. May the stories in this issue of *Journey* inspire you as you discern God’s call upon your life.



In Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Joe'.

Joe Clifford
Pastor

Our faith. At work.

6

Faith on Canvas

Caroline Simas blends her faith and creative spirit into a vocation that's grown to have a global footprint.

10

Beautifully Complicated: Insights on Pastoral Life

Megan Argabrite, Pastor of Amity Presbyterian Church, shares about the unique challenges and deep joys of pastoral life.

14

Trusting the Whisper

Follow Priscilla Chapman's leap of faith that led her to become a co-founder of Furnish for Good.

18

Faith in the Face of High School

For Eliza Cuthbertson, faith was not just a part of her life; it shaped her entire high school experience.

22

The Best Commission

Kay Ethridge brings her artistry and craft into the Sanctuary and Oxford Hall at Myers Park Presbyterian Church.

26

The Two Hat Dilemma

Katherine Turk shares her experience of balancing dual roles as a church member and staff person at Myers Park Presbyterian Church.

28

Reflections on Faith and Medicine

Dr. Luke Farmer explores the interplay of his faith and his medical practice and how it informs the emotional and ethical complexities inherent in his work in oncology.

Faith on Canvas

...and sidewalks, and furniture, and ornaments, and...



By Caroline Simas

Caroline Simas's journey as an artist began with simple crayon drawings as a child and evolved into a global ministry through her art. A devoted member of Myers Park Pres, she integrates her faith and creativity in every piece she creates.

Art has always been more than just a vocation for me; it's been a deeply spiritual journey, a ministry which allows me to weave my faith into every stroke of the brush. From the very beginning, I felt a calling to use the gifts and talents I've been given to create something meaningful which could touch people's lives and reflect the beauty of God's creation.

My journey as an artist began as soon as I could hold a crayon. After a brief career in elementary education, I began a business painting many interior murals, baby linens, children's furniture, and also leading children's art lessons. What began as a personal project eventually led to the creation of Christian greeting cards.

I remember the joy and fulfillment I felt when I first merged my watercolors with scripture. It was more than just art; it was a way to share God's word through a medium that I loved. Each card was a small piece of my heart, infused with my faith and hope that it would bring comfort, joy, or inspiration to someone. That was the beginning of my



A young Caroline Simas



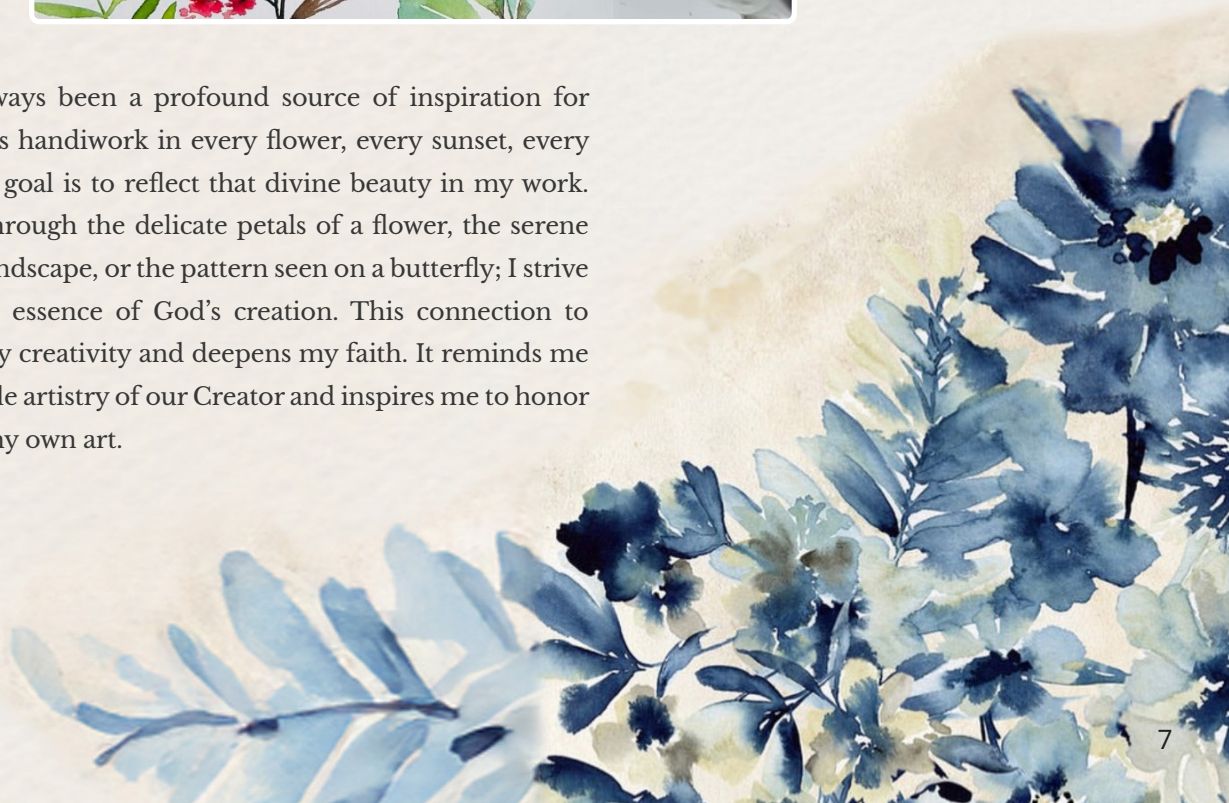
company, Multiple Blessings, and the ripple effect was just that – blessings multiplied each time one was shared. This initial step was the foundation of my belief that art can be an ordinary yet powerful tool for ministry.

As my work evolved, I ventured into licensing my paintings to be featured on various home decor and gifts. This transition opened up a new world of opportunities for my art. Seeing my creations paired with God's word or inspirational messages on products around the world has been incredibly humbling. It means so much to know that my art can offer a moment of beauty and reflection to people I may never meet. This global reach has reaffirmed my belief that God has given us talents to use wisely and well, for a purpose greater than ourselves.



A few botanical explorations by Caroline

Nature has always been a profound source of inspiration for me. I see God's handiwork in every flower, every sunset, every landscape. My goal is to reflect that divine beauty in my work. Whether it's through the delicate petals of a flower, the serene expanse of a landscape, or the pattern seen on a butterfly; I strive to capture the essence of God's creation. This connection to nature fuels my creativity and deepens my faith. It reminds me of the incredible artistry of our Creator and inspires me to honor that through my own art.



One of the most rewarding aspects of my journey has been teaching workshops and leading art retreats. There is something magical about watching others discover their creative potential, especially those who don't initially consider themselves artistic. I love encouraging people to take notice of the world around them, gather inspiration from nature, and approach art with child-like wonder. It's a joy to see their surprise and delight when they create something beautiful.

My passion lies in helping women unleash the artist within. Many come to my workshops and retreats with no art experience since kindergarten but leave with newfound confidence and a deeper appreciation for their own creativity. These experiences are not just about art; they are about empowerment, self-discovery, faith, and courage. I am incredibly thankful for the opportunity to travel the world, leading both domestic and international creative adventures. These retreats provide a sacred space for participants of all levels to reflect, journal, paint, and connect through art and fellowship.

Caroline's studio in South End



TRANSFORMED, by Caroline Simas, is a permanent installation in the lobby of The Line in South End.

Throughout my journey, I have been blessed to meet so many wonderful people. Each interaction, each shared story, has enriched my life and affirmed my belief in the power of art as ministry. I feel incredibly fortunate to do what I love every day, to see my work touch lives, and to be a part of something so much bigger than myself. Art has been my way of sharing my faith, my way of reflecting God's beauty and love to the world.

In every piece I create, every workshop I lead, every retreat I organize, every creative coaching session, every mural or interactive sculpture, my goal remains the same: to use my talents well, to honor God, and to inspire others to lead a creative life. This journey has been one of faith, creativity, and endless gratitude. It's a testament to the belief that we are each given unique gifts and, when used with purpose and passion, those gifts can create something truly beautiful and meaningful. ★★

Each of you should
use whatever gift
you have received
to serve others, as
faithful stewards of
God's grace in its
various forms.

– 1 Peter 4:10



Visit Caroline's studio in South End or visit carolinesimas.com to see her work firsthand and experience her creations.

Dilworth Artisan Station
117, E. Kinston Ave, Studio #24
Monday-Friday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m.

South End Gallery Crawl
First Friday of the month, 5:30-8:30 p.m.

Beautifully Complicated

Insights on pastoral life

By Megan Argabrite

Megan Argabrite is the pastor serving Amity Presbyterian Church and the Lewis Rose Postgraduate Fellow. Her journey to ordination was anything but straightforward, filled with moments of doubt, discovery, and conviction. In this Q & A, Megan shares her experiences, insights, and the unique challenges of being a pastor – a conversation we may often overlook with our own pastors.



Q Could you share a little bit of your call story?

A There is no “little bit” to my call story. It’s a long and winding road! But I’ll do my best to summarize. I grew up in the church and experienced faith deeply as a child and through the youth group years. In college, I pushed against my faith just as deeply, to the point of rejecting it. But God must have a sense of humor. Even though I refused to call myself a Christian, I somehow ended up being accepted to serve a year in the PC(USA) Young Adult Volunteer program after graduation. Within the first few months of that program, I was applying to seminary. Telling myself “I just want to study, not become a pastor,” I began my theological education.

Refusing to be rushed through the process, I took my time. I spent seven years in part time seminary and eight years as an inquirer under care of Salem Presbytery. In that time, I received my MDiv degree, passed my ordination exams, began working in the church in the area of worship and arts, and my husband and I welcomed two children. But I never felt convinced of my call to ordained ministry. It simply wasn’t the right time. I removed myself from the ordination process in Salem Presbytery, but continued working in the church.

A few years passed, and I was sitting in a worship service at a conference. As the service progressed, I felt a curious sense of building urgency that I could not explain. Then, at the moment the minister raised the communion bread over her head to break it, I heard very clearly the words “It’s time.” I knew that meant ordination, and for the first time in my long call story, I could respond to God with a confident “Yes!” As soon as I returned home, I reached out to Charlotte Presbytery, who took me under care. My first call was to Amity Presbyterian Church, where I happily serve today.



Megan leading a baptism service with her congregation.

Q What is the community and culture of Amity Pres?

A Amity is a small church by the numbers, but a mighty church by faith. Five years ago, Amity was predominantly a traditional, older, white congregation of folks who have been members here for decades. Proud of their history and traditions, they knew Jesus was calling them to grow and change into something new, but they didn’t know what that was. We’ve spent five years together discerning that, and if there is one thing I now know for sure about the saints of Amity, it’s that they will courageously answer God’s call into new places. That courage has shaped them into a wonderfully welcoming community of faith that God is growing in surprisingly beautiful ways.

These days, the thing that makes Amity truly unique is the presence of our new African Fellowship. Since Spring 2023, we have been blessed by a growing community of (mostly) Congolese refugees who worship together in Swahili on Sunday afternoons. Rather than being two congregations sharing space, we have been intentional about growing as one

church. Many in the African Fellowship have joined Amity Church and they now make up about half of our worshipping congregation. It’s certainly not easy to build community across language, culture, and even theological tradition, but it sure is beautiful. I do believe we are getting a holy glimpse of the Kingdom of heaven.



The Sanctuary of Amity Presbyterian Church

Q Where do you experience God in the daily duties of being a pastor?

A I experience the presence of God most profoundly in meaningful moments with church and community members. Being a pastor is an incredibly busy job, so it's really easy to fill up your days with tasks and administrative work, so much so that you don't make time for your people. But the people are where God is. That's where the holy is. I experience God in the coffee dates and the "do you have a minute?" visits in my office; in the moments of celebration with grandparents and the prayers of desperation with strangers in need. I am consistently humbled by the the privilege of being invited so deeply into the lives of others. It's such a sacred thing to share these moments. To be with people on their best days and their worst days is a true gift of being the church.

Q Have you faced moments of doubt or spiritual struggle in your pastoral journey? How did you navigate those times?

A Of course! I am human and life is complex. Moments of struggle and doubt are a natural part of a pastor's journey just like the folks in our pews. The challenge for pastors is knowing where to seek out support in a way that is healthy for us and our congregation. I find friendship and connection with other pastors essential and life-giving when things get tough. Being a pastor, especially a solo pastor, can be a lonely experience if you don't have solid community outside of your congregation. Yes, you are often surrounded by lots of people, but relationships between a pastor and members of their congregation have important boundaries that can be limiting. Having trusted colleagues in ministry can provide support and encouragement when you need it. That, and therapy. Always therapy.



Ordaining a new Elder at Amity.

Q In what ways does your congregation influence your own spiritual growth?

A I have learned a lot from my congregation. Seeing older members who have spent a lifetime in faithful dedication to their faith and church is both humbling and inspiring. I often find myself thinking, "I hope I can be as steadfast and generous when I am their age." The unique congregation that God is growing at Amity this year is teaching me so much! None of the folks who are a part of our African Fellowship come from a white, American Presbyterian background like I do. They have different traditions and ways of being the church together, and bring so many gifts that enrich our beloved community. We are learning from each other's gifts and questions. We are all being stretched and challenged in "the way we do things." As a pastor, it has deepened my trust in the guidance of the Holy Spirit and helped me let go of the need to control how things turn out. Every day is a beautiful reminder that God really does know better than I do.



Megan leading the children's moment during worship.



Q What are some ways our congregation can better support or encourage our pastors?

A Pray for us. We really do need it. And pray for us when we are in the room. Having someone take your hand and pray for you can be a powerfully nourishing gift. You'd be surprised how rare it is that someone does that for us. Prayers, notes, and words of encouragement are always appreciated and often become unexpected blessings.

Respect our personal and professional boundaries and our time away from the church. It can be hard for us to say no to a request, even when we should, because we really do love our people. If you really want to be helpful, ask what your pastor needs that will make taking time away more feasible. Think about practical things like offering to babysit their kids for a date night or, when they are planning to take vacation time, volunteer to handle something for them at church before they have to ask.

And finally, try and stay aware of your pastor's financial and family needs, and if you can help in some way, offer to do so. This will vary by congregation and pastor, of course, but most of us are balancing bills and family responsibilities like everyone else. Things like available health insurance, rising housing costs, or family illness can cause anyone a lot of stress. We all have weary and worrisome seasons, and in those moments it really matters to know our congregation cares and is responding to the needs however possible. ★★

About the Rose Fellowship Program

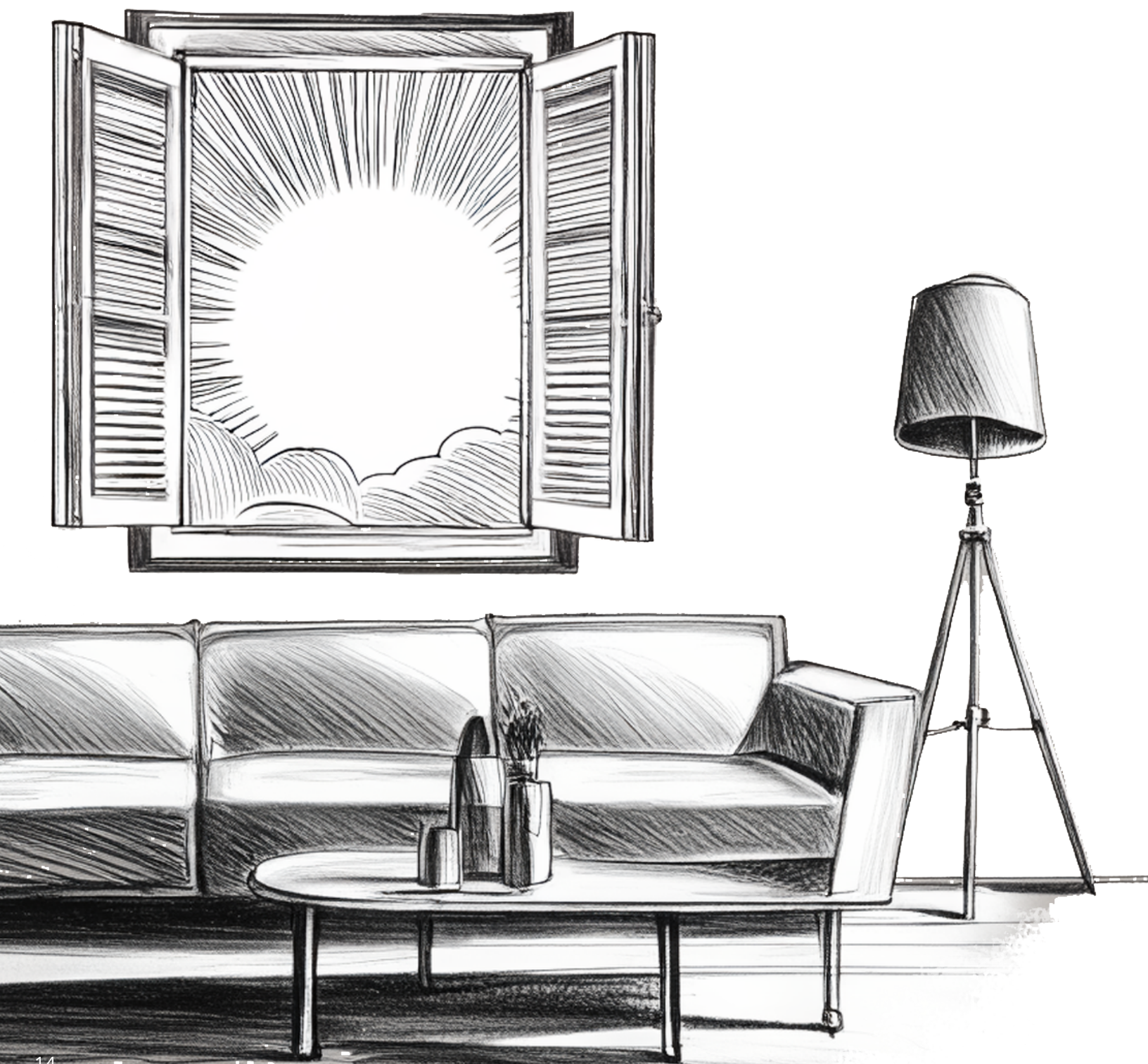
The Rose Postgraduate Fellowship Program is a collaborative effort by Myers Park Presbyterian Church, Union Presbyterian Seminary, the Presbytery of Charlotte, and the Presbyterian Church (USA) Board of Pensions. The fellowship addresses the critical need for young, seminary-trained pastors in congregations that may find it challenging to cover the full cost of employment benefits.

Megan Argabrite and Amity Presbyterian Church are recipients of this fellowship program. With this support, Megan has been able to focus on leading the congregation, developing her pastoral skills, and bringing fresh energy and vision to God's beloved community.

The Rose Fellowship Program exemplifies a commitment to empowering the next generation of church leaders.



Amity Presbyterian Church



Trusting the Whisper

Discovering a Life of
Faith and Purpose

By Kathy Izard

This story draws heavily from a chapter in Kathy Izard's book, 'Trust the Whisper,' with permission from the author. Kathy's eloquent writing and insights beautifully capture the journey of Myers Park Pres member Priscilla Chapman and her co-founders, Lesley Faulkner and Mary Beth Hollett, in starting the nonprofit Furnish for Good. Special thanks to Kathy for allowing us to share these excerpts. "Trust the Whisper" is available at Park Road Books and everywhere books are sold.

As Priscilla Chapman approached her fortieth birthday, she found herself at a crossroads. With her children growing up and things feeling put together, she found herself thinking about her own life again. "All I worried about were my kids and what I was going to wear," she said. "I just knew I had to do more on this earth than worry about what I was going to wear."

In her recent book 'Trust the Whisper,' Kathy Izard recounts stories of individuals who have listened to a persistent inner voice, the "whisper," urging them to take bold, often uncomfortable steps toward making a difference. This whisper of a higher calling would lead Priscilla to take a leap that would change not only her life, but the lives of countless others through a nonprofit called Furnish for Good.

Priscilla's journey began at a yoga retreat, where she found herself in child's pose, pondering her next forty years. "I have absolutely no idea what to do with my life," she thought. This was the start of a journey to seek a deeper purpose. A friend of Priscilla's suggested she get together with Kathy to explore what that might look like. During their coffee meeting, Kathy asked,

 "What breaks your heart?"

For Priscilla, it was an easy response, "What breaks my heart has always been seeing people living without a home. It broke my heart as a child and it breaks my heart today."



Priscilla was particularly moved by the idea of giving people transitioning out of homelessness the opportunity to choose their furnishings, inspired by The Green Chair Project in Raleigh. That resonated with two other women, Lesley Faulkner and Mary Beth Hollett, and together they felt called to create Furnish for Good in Charlotte.



Priscilla Chapman, Lesley Faulkner, and Mary Beth Hollett, the founders of Furnish for Good.

“The real magic happened when we brainstormed and just went for it,” Mary Beth said. “The word ‘no’ never got in our way, and that’s when we realized that Furnish for Good could be whatever we wanted it to be.” Their combined skills, strengths, and faith enabled them to overcome the initial hurdles of establishing a nonprofit within six months.

Faith played a crucial role in every step of their journey. “It is just incredible how every time we have needed something, it just seemed to appear,” Priscilla said. The three women each excelled in a different, critical piece of Furnish for Good. She’s never met a stranger and can strike up a conversation with anyone, so Priscilla leaned in, working directly with clients. “Who would have thought that the notes on my report card, ‘talks too much to peers during class,’ could be a gift one day,” she said.

Genie Scheurer happened upon Furnish for Good early on. “In March 2019, I ran into Priscilla at the Youth Ministry Chicken Pickin’ and we started chatting. When I asked what she was up to, she simply said, ‘I’m starting a nonprofit.’ She laughed as she told me she was partnering with two people she didn’t really know and said, ‘We have no idea what we’re doing.’ However, she knew they had been brought together by God and that with God’s help, they would build a nonprofit that would make a difference in Charlotte.”

“Priscilla has a natural ability to connect and inspire people; she is dynamic and encouraging,” says Genie. “She approaches each challenge with enthusiasm, humor, and faith. She doesn’t sweat the small stuff and tackles challenges with joy and a clear sense of purpose.”

Members of Myers Park Presbyterian Church volunteering at Furnish for Good.



Our fourth and fifth grade Mission Kids spent a day volunteering at Furnish for Good during Vacation Bible School.



Through their work with Furnish for Good, Priscilla, Lesley, and Mary Beth witnessed the transformative power of faith and community. Each piece of furniture they provided, each family they helped move into a new home, was a gentle nudge that affirmed they were on the right track.

“I think the most exciting part for me when Furnish for Good was getting off the ground was seeing Priscilla, Lesley, and Mary Beth, who didn’t know each other well, come together with their different ideas and take a leap of faith to get this venture running,” said Kitty Bray, a member of Myers Park Pres and the Furnish for Good Board. “I am amazed by how much

we have grown since 2019! We have served over 2,011 neighbors in need and work with 37-plus partnering agencies, including Myers Park Presbyterian Church. Through the grace of God, these three women stay focused and passionate about giving hope and dignity to our clients.”

“Over the last five years, it has been exciting to watch Priscilla, Lesley, and Mary Beth navigate each step with faith, energy, and unwavering commitment,” says Genie. “They have forged ahead with total commitment, hard work, and faith. Their faith has guided every step and they have trusted that they will find the way and overcome each challenge.

As Priscilla feels called her to her next chapter, she reflects on the impact of trusting that initial nudge. “After listening to the first whisper, it’s impossible to silence that for the rest of my life,” she said, “I’ll keep my eyes, ears, and heart open to whatever the next chapter brings.” ★★

Interested in getting involved with Furnish for Good? Reach out to our Outreach Office at outreach@myersparkpres.org and visit furnishforgood.org to learn more about donating furnishings.



God shows up often in Eliza's social media feed.



Eliza Cuthbertson is a lifelong member of Myers Park Presbyterian Church. Baptized, confirmed, and ordained as an Elder, now, she's a high school graduate and beginning her undergraduate education at Appalachian State University in the fall.

Faith in the Face Of High School Hopes Pressure Expectations Competition Anxiety



Left: Eliza, the High School graduate.

Below: Eliza, the eighth grade confirmand.

On June 13, I walked across the stage and graduated high school. I'm still not quite sure I believe it! My high school experience was an incredible and challenging journey, but looking back, my eighth-grade confirmation experience helped set me up to navigate it well.



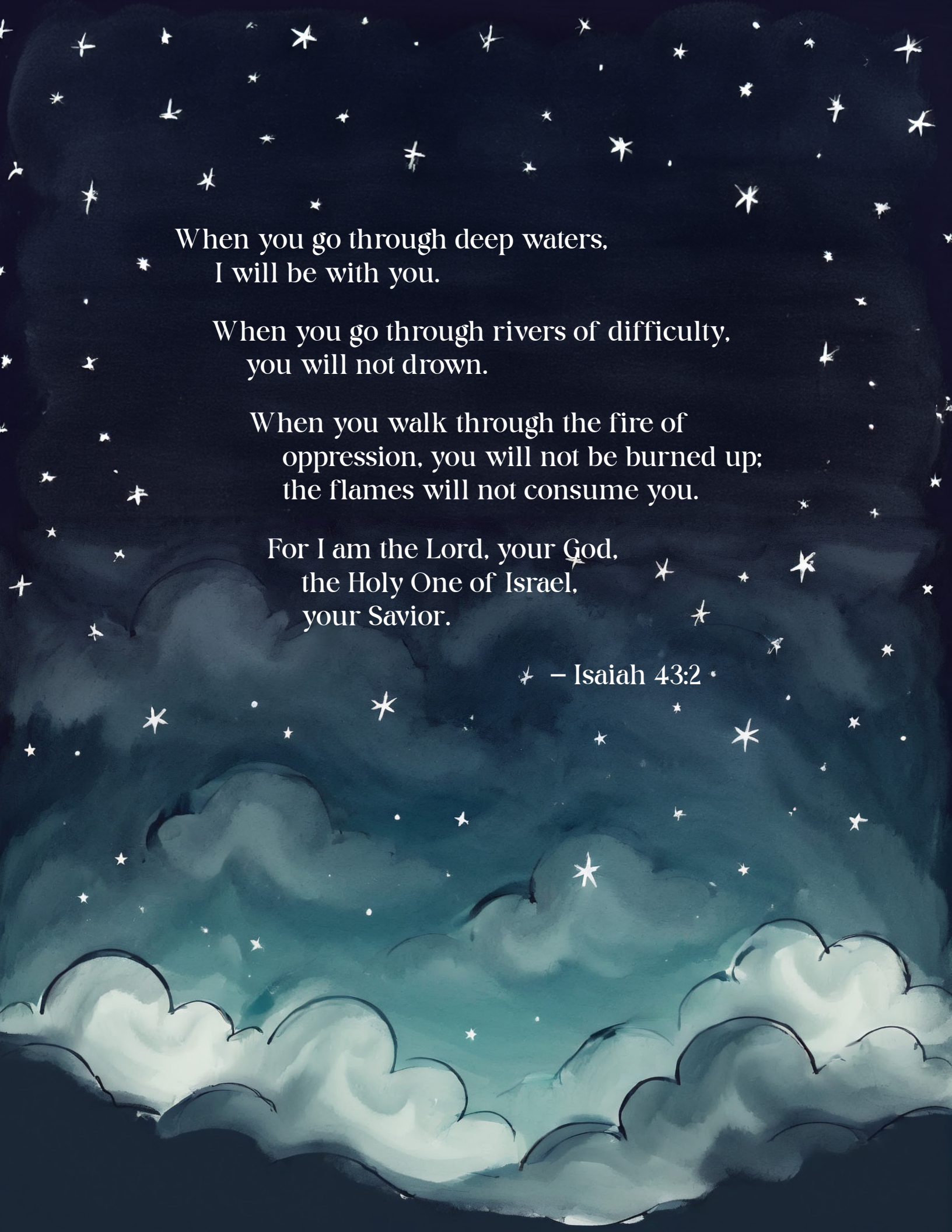
Part of being a confirmand at Myers Park Presbyterian Church involves reading a lot of Bible verses and choosing one that stands out to you. The one I chose turned out to be a constant during high school and will continue to be a source of hope throughout my life:

“When you go through deep waters, I will be with you. When you go through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown. When you walk through the fire of oppression, you will not be burned up; the flames will not consume you. For I am the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.” – Isaiah 43:2

Being a high school student today is highly competitive, especially when you're a senior. Everyone is striving to get into the best colleges, be in the most popular social circles, and excel on their sports teams. This intensity, coupled with the joy of school dances and sports events, brought me closer to my friends and classmates.

I wish that people knew how draining high school life can be.





When you go through deep waters,
I will be with you.

When you go through rivers of difficulty,
you will not drown.

When you walk through the fire of
oppression, you will not be burned up;
the flames will not consume you.

For I am the Lord, your God,
the Holy One of Israel,
your Savior.

— Isaiah 43:2

The constant social and academic demands create a cycle where every day feels stressful, even during fun moments. Finding small ways to switch up your routine – whether during or after school – can transform your week.



If you're a student looking to live your faith more actively: dive in! Join clubs, Bible studies, and small groups. Engage in anything that deepens your connection with the Lord. These experiences will allow you to live out God's light and help you find joy and hope amid the stress and competitiveness that seems to take over.

My faith keeps having a positive impact on me. Over and over again. And I know that I'll keep seeking out ways to continue my journey with God.

This fall, I'll be a freshman at App State. While I'll miss spending time at Myers Park Presbyterian Church, I know that God will show up in Boone. ★★

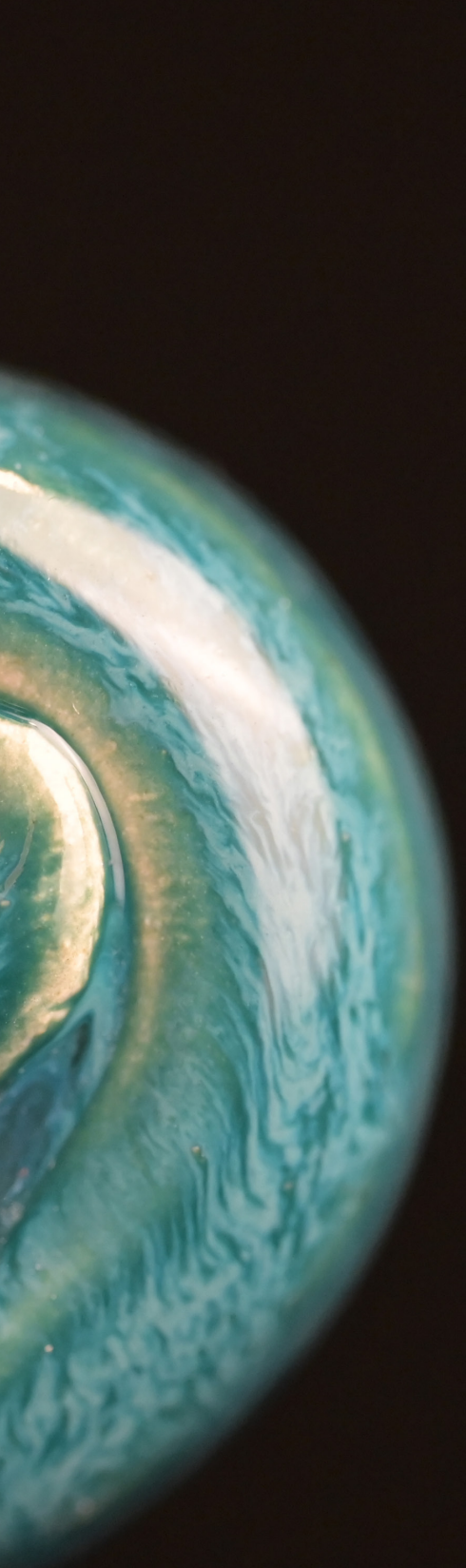
Youth Group provided that necessary break for me. It gave me a space away from school to reflect on my academic and social life through the lens of faith. The advice and lessons from Youth Group strengthened my friendships and gave me a healthier perspective on school and the stress and pressure that came along with it.

When I'm not at church, I don't try to hide my faith. My friends and I have conversations about God, I pray, and sometimes post scripture on Instagram – and people respond positively. I'm grateful that something as important to me as my faith is something I can express freely.





A close up of the new communionware created by Kay Ethridge.



The Best Commission

By Kay Ethridge

Kay Ethridge has been working clay since her 20s, honing her craft and serving our congregation with her beautiful creations. She was invited to create the communionware which now graces the Lord's Table in the Sanctuary and Oxford Hall.

I have been connecting through clay for half a century. This year, I realized that doing so is my ministry.

In January 2023, Mark Kemp, Cameron Moore, and Susan Tome (then chair of the worship council) asked me to create new pieces for the sacrament of communion, an act that connects us spiritually. I appreciated the faith they showed by giving me the time and space to fulfill my response to their commission. The only guidelines they provided were which specific pieces were needed and not to use the color red.

When I started working in the studio, I felt intimidated.

Not only were these pieces destined for sacred spaces, but they would also appear unexpectedly – a change for the congregation. The pieces would sit on the communion table on days other than the first Sunday of each month when we serve communion. I decided the pieces had to be different from anything I had made before.

First, I formulated and mixed glazes to test colors, as I wanted them to reflect the environment they would inhabit. Glaze is not like paint; the color in its raw state is different from the color after it is fired in the kiln. Through a chemical reaction, the final color is revealed after firing at high temperatures.

When I opened the kiln with the test pieces, I was perplexed. Piece after piece had red on it! How could this be? It was the only color I knew I wasn't testing for.



But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us.

– 2 Corinthians 4:7



Top: The new communionware for the Sanctuary.

Right: The new communionware for Oxford Hall.

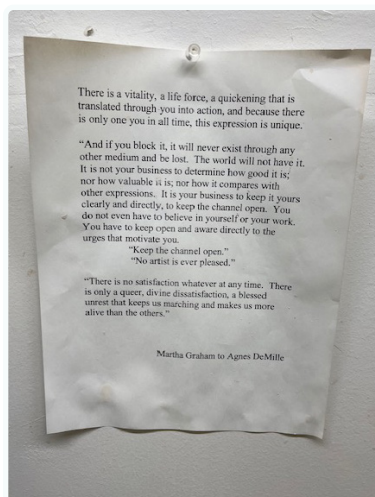
I called my friend Ginny, the owner of the clay supply company. She discovered that her worker had transposed some numbers and mistakenly given me the wrong product.

The red on the pieces was the same gorgeous red that appears throughout the Sanctuary. I realized then: I am not creating to meet our vision. This is for God's house, and God wants red.

I needed to focus on God's guidance. God led me to learn, take my time, and be open to creating something new.

Next to my pottery wheel, I keep a quote that my dear friend, the late political cartoonist Doug Marlette, shared with me when we were starting our careers as artists in our twenties. *"Keep the channel open. No artist is ever pleased. There is no satisfaction whatsoever at any time. There is only a queer, divine dissatisfaction, a blessed unrest that keeps us marching and makes us more alive than others."*

This quote is by dancer and choreographer Martha Graham to Agnes De Mille, also a dancer and choreographer. It perfectly describes the divine intervention I feel when I am in my creative process.

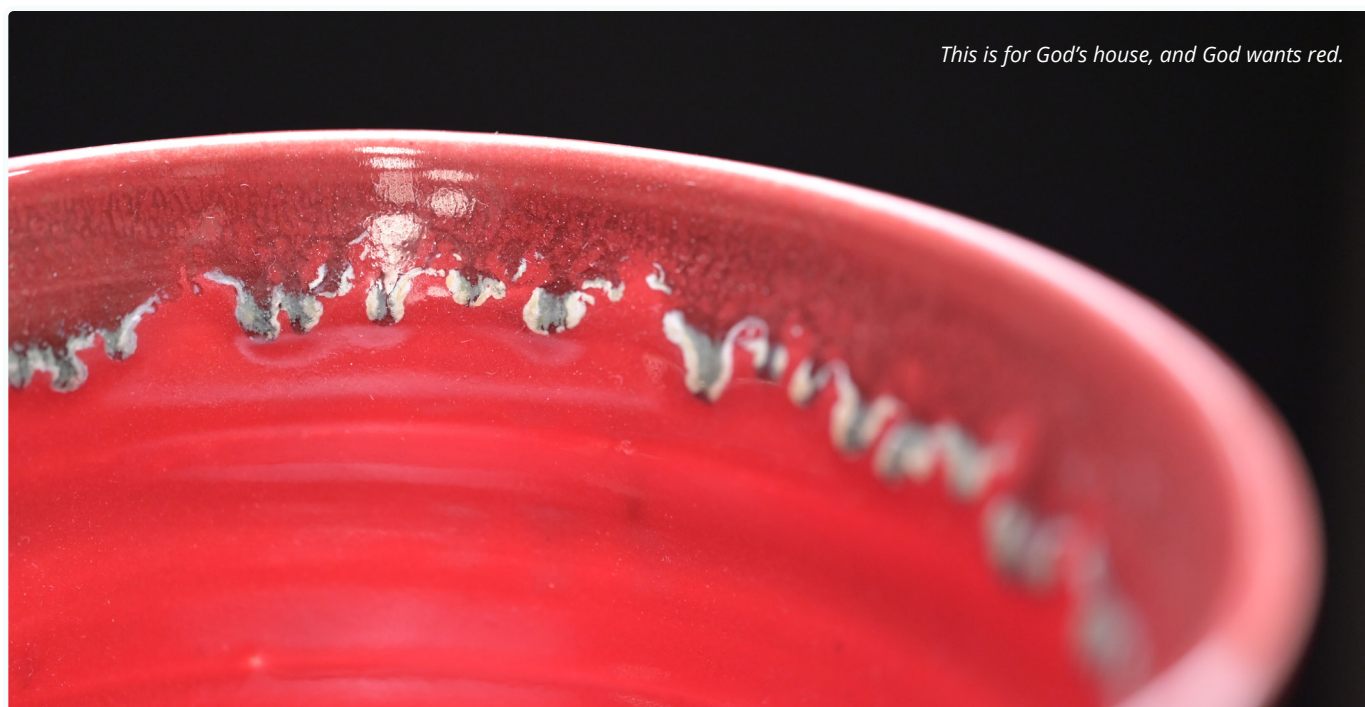
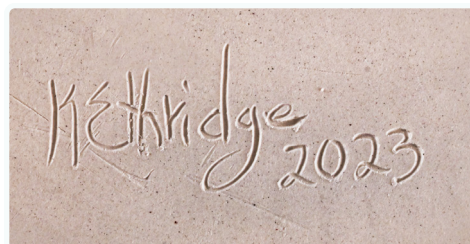


Over the years, God has guided me to connect through clay with communion sets and other items used in the life of the church. These include crosses, a baptismal font, confirmation and baptism gifts, wedding gifts, and cinerary urns in several churches in Charlotte, as well as other states and countries.

I have been blessed to share profound moments throughout the whole cycle of spiritual life, providing symbols and connecting through clay.

Whoever thought that the most modest, malleable substance could be impactful? I, like clay, am a substance void of meaning unless shaped and restored by the hands of the restorer, God.

In guiding me in the creation of the new communion pieces, God showed me I am welcome at the table – and reminded me that I am already there.



This is for God's house, and God wants red.



The Two Hat Dilemma

By Katherine Turk

Katherine Turk, our Assistant Communications Director, shares her reflections on the joys and challenges of balancing her roles as both a church member and staff.

“Would you put your member hat on for me?”

It’s a question I get quite often here at work as one of those mythical hybrids: both church member and staff person.

“How can I help?” I ask, miming taking off my staff hat and jauntily placing my church member one on top of my head.

It's a fun little diddy, but now that I think about it, the metaphor doesn't really work. It's not that simple, and certainly not that neat. I don't stop being a member while I work on our website, just like I don't stop being a staff person during worship.

For better or worse, I am fully both (two hats securely on my head – a fashion statement, for sure).

I was a member first, having searched for a church home for nearly a year after my husband and I moved to Charlotte. A friend and former coworker from Pittsburgh was interviewing for a job at this big church called Myers Park Presbyterian, so I figured we might as well check it out too. We were intimidated, but welcome; inspired and convicted. If this congregation thought John Magnuson would be a good fit, well we might be a good fit too. We stayed.

Not too long after that, John called me up to ask how much I liked my job (I didn't). There was a job opening in the MPPC Communications Department and he had immediately thought of me. I had lived the experience of being both member and staff person at a Presbyterian Church once before... the dual hats didn't scare me, so I said I'd apply. I'd throw my hat in the ring, so to say (okay, perhaps I'm overextending the metaphor).

Well, dear reader, I got the job.

Since my first day here, it's been a joy and a challenge to step foot into the Welcome Center six days a week, simultaneously eager to serve my amazing church, yet fearful I won't measure up. There's a voice in my head that tells me, "If you don't give your all, all day every day, you'll not only let down your peers on staff, but your fellow church members too." If my first attempt at a design isn't absolutely incredible, I fear I've wasted the precious, hard-earned tithe of a fellow member... not to mention the time of a fellow staff person.

It can be a lot at times.

But...

It has been the biggest blessing navigating the murky waters of dual-hat-citizenship here at MPPC.



Katherine Turk, Celebrate Band Member



Katherine Turk, Weekday School Parent

For as in one body
we have many
members and not all
the members have the
same function, so we,
who are many, are
one body in Christ,
and individually we
are members one of
another.

– Romans 12:4–5



Katherine Turk, Congregant

I have gotten a peek behind the curtain of how such an incredible, multifaceted church operates and I have a secret to tell you: it's just a bunch of wonderfully flawed humans running this ship. Just like you... just like me.

And thank God.

Thank God that perfection is not required to work at a church (even though many of us staff members try so hard to make Sunday mornings seem effortless). Thank God that perfection is not required to worship (even though many of us church members try so hard to look in tip-top shape each Sunday morning).

Thank God that God works through our humanity and despite our humanity – on our best days and on our worst days. I wouldn't be able to do my job without this truth. None of us would.

Yet, this is a truth I sometimes struggle to accept. I want so badly to do my absolute best for you (fellow church member and/or fellow staff member). I hesitate to admit how long I've put off writing this article or the countless times I've allowed my phone to suck focus away from creating the new design for the Annual Giving Campaign... Both numbers are high.

But.

God has this incredible way of using wonderfully flawed human beings to bring about some seriously good things: Mary, Moses, Lydia, Paul, Solomon, Peter... Scripture certainly doesn't hold back elucidating their fears, uncertainties, ineptitudes, or general humanity. So maybe... just maybe... God might be able to use me too. ★★



Katherine Turk, church employee

Reflections on Faith and Medicine

By Luke Farmer

Dr. Luke Farmer delves into the daily emotional and ethical complexities of oncology and how his faith shapes his approach to medicine.



Last Fall, I was asked to convey a helpful and meaningful message to pastors for a *Journal for Preachers*, a sort of trade journal for, you guessed it, preachers. My initial response was to say “God, no!” Surely those folks are closer to God, by nature of their profession. They already wrestle with the daily mess of caring for members of their flock who are sick, grieving, suffering, lonely, and depressed. They are well-seasoned professionals. None of my insights will be particularly helpful to them. They expertly navigate the entire range of human experience, from the joys of births and weddings to the brokenness of human relationships, illness, and death. I am just an amateur.

Then I realized that this exercise was as much for me and my patients as for the pastors.

On any given day, I toggle with speed and efficiency between joy, frustration, and sorrow. I start the day rejoicing with a patient in the news that her cancer appears to be cured or that he is in remission. Ten minutes later I take a deep breath at the door to the exam room, as I am about to tell a sweet older man that he may just not make it to celebrate that next grandchild’s graduation. Sometimes I struggle to muster up the empathy that I want to have, that I know Jesus would want me to have. Other times I just hope the next cup of coffee will give me more compassion.

I believe that many in medicine undergo multiple mini-traumatic experiences a day. Any provider who has participated in a Code Blue for a cardiac arrest that had a bad outcome will tell you this. We learn early on in training not to forget these experiences but to put them in a storage closet so that we can pull them out and work through them later, when there is more time and fewer patients. That rarely ever happens. The much easier way to cope is to become numb, or worse yet, bitter and cynical. We do not adequately process these experiences, and as a result we often do not grow from them as we could.

I still wrestle with the role emotion should play in my job. Why is it that I can stare an elderly woman directly in the eye and tell her she has six weeks or less to live and not even shed a tear, then get choked up seeing her hold her partner’s hand? I surprise myself with what moves me. Patients who are struggling with so much yet take the time to ask me about my children. The old farmer who brings me eggs and tomatoes from his summer garden. The daughter who writes a note thanking me for all I did for her deceased father, telling me how blessed he was to have us caring for him. The last patient I see before the holidays who says, “Merry Christmas,” recognizing it will likely be her last.

Mixed between tears and the next fifteen-minute appointment is a barrage of messages, labs, treatment decisions, cost considerations for patients, when to choose one more cycle or call in Hospice. The oncologist must walk a narrow tight rope between not treating patients’ cancer aggressively enough and risking overtreatment with medications that are too strong for frail patients.

Decisions, decisions. I occasionally stop and pray that my decisions will be the “correct” ones, that they will somehow reflect God’s will. Then I worry that I don’t have the time in the day to pray as I should. I am a perfectionist, tirelessly devoted to keeping my patients alive and living well, in a job with a 100% failure rate. Where do I find my purpose in helping people along their journey to becoming dust? How do I balance science and the art of medicine, reason and faith, while remaining faithful to my Creator?



Right: Luke, Luke Jr., and Jan Scott Farmer at Luke's graduation from Medical School in 2014.

There was a period about a year ago when I was struggling. Not with my work, but with relationships.. How could I engage in a casual Saturday morning conversation with neighbors when my mind was completely on my sick patient? How could I be present during my son's soccer game when I kept wrestling with the appropriate treatment plan for another patient?

I found myself worrying in the middle of throwing the football, watching my daughter at a ballet recital, on vacation at the beach, or even in the middle of a run. I would obsessively check charts of patients on my phone. Much of my worrying and chart stalking is unproductive and self-destructive. Unchecked, obsessing and worrying can alienate me from the people right in front of me, even my wife and children. I had forgotten how to worry well.

Some of this is not entirely my fault, but a result of technology making us instantly accessible for any number of patient messages at all times. Our medical training to some degree rewards compulsiveness and worrying. Indeed, the worrying sometimes pays off and may help a patient. Yet in the process of trying to stay connected to patients when I am not physically there to help them, I threaten to shut out those whom I love the most. I seal myself off from the community around me, when I know God has created us to be in relationship with this community.

Patients ask me nearly every day how long I believe they have to live. My immediate response is that I am not God, then I go on to offer a medical prediction based on randomized studies. I owe it to them to be realistic, yet sometimes this dashes patients' hopes. That feels out of step with my calling as a physician and a person of faith. Hope can be transformative. I have seen patients live months, even years, longer than expected on hope alone.

One of my closest physician mentors reminded me that my job is not to play God, not to try to predict the future, or write patients' destinies. In my core, I know this is true. Yet everything about modern medical training is geared around trying to be God. We physicians are trained from the beginning to have the right answer, to make the accurate diagnosis and prognosis, to fix the problem, to find the solution that will buy a patient three more months of life. In the pursuit of medical perfection, physicians have created a culture of shame around imperfection. Shame can become buried deep within people, where it festers and leads to burnout, depression, and most of all, a profound sense of loneliness.

This itself is a deep shame, because only physicians who make these decisions can truly understand the weight that their colleagues feel. If we could abandon

our own sense of pride, or for some our deeper sense of shame, we physicians might be able to witness to God's transformative healing power for one another.

Our culture of isolation is exacerbated by the lack of in-person medical conferences and other physician gatherings post-COVID. Introverts though many of us may be, physicians find job satisfaction in the camaraderie built around working together to



Luke and his sons

figure a problem out, collaborating, and in the case of trainees, going through a mentally and physically tough training experience together and coming out on the other side. Like many professions, we, as a medical community, have lost some of this sense of collegiality and mutual support over the past three years.

With applications on our phone, we can see labs and results quicker than ever before. We communicate now more than ever, but this technology does not always enable us to communicate well. In the midst of a discussion with a patient about transitioning to

Hospice, I am likely to be pinged ten to fifteen times about signing chemotherapy orders, approving labs, or scheduling a peer-to-peer review to make my case to a fellow doctor why an insurance company should pay for my patient to undergo a special PET scan.

It's tempting to approach my peer-to-peer review with the insurance physician not as a cordial discussion about the most appropriate care plan, but as a battle to be won. The doctor on the other line becomes the adversary, someone who left patient care and who no longer understands what it is like to take care of real patients.

The medical system is designed such that it is often more adversarial than collegial, and sadly patients sometimes get caught in the crosshairs.

In the midst of egos and distractions, how do I remind myself to truly listen and minister to the patient who is suffering in front of me? With all the competing demands, how do I place my attention on the patients who need help the most?

I went to seminary right out of college, sensing that perhaps I was called to be a pastor. Midway through my second year, that calling abruptly changed. I began to explore going to medical school, which I had considered initially as an undergraduate. I discovered that if Jesus himself took human flesh and redeemed it, then there was something innately mysterious and holy about the body. I devoted my life to caring for human bodies as "wonderfully and fearfully made" in God's image. I thought of medicine as the most incarnational of callings and felt it was the most tangible way that I could serve God and God's people. That image stayed with me throughout much of my first year of medical school. I remember going through the anatomy lab, studying the cadavers and reflecting on Psalm 139... "you knit me together in my mother's womb." That probably sounds weird, but the intricacies of God's creation amazed me.

By the end of the second year, however, I saw firsthand the innumerable ways that God's human creations go

into disarray. Through random inborn mutations in utero, or wear and tear from years of poor human choices, the body inevitably falls apart. Cancer is perhaps one of the cruellest examples of this.

At first, I became frustrated at the relentless progression of cancer, how it could escape detection and then show up in the brain when you least expected it, or how it could blow up and make people deathly ill within weeks. This decay hardly felt consistent with Jesus' mission of redeeming the human body, restoring it to wholeness.

I had to reframe my understanding of incarnation. God did not enter into human flesh to make the body the most perfect version of itself. God assumed human form not to erase human pathology, but to redeem it and restore the body to right relationship. This reframing has helped me a great deal as I tried to share God's hope with patients who are suffering from cancer.



The Farmers on Easter Sunday

This reflection is not meant to whine about being overworked, to lament and reminisce about the good days of medicine, or to blame the massive modern health care institution in spite of all its flaws. Despite all their griping about increasing corporatization of healthcare, physicians are still a privileged lot.

Even so, many physicians struggle with deep loneliness and alienation, within the medical community and outside of it. We need to be reminded that while our friends may not always understand, Jesus certainly does. We must always remember that contrary to the teaching of medical education, our job is not to play God, but to participate in God's loving care and provision for our patients. This is the joy of medicine.

Regardless of your profession or calling, my hope is that through rightly ordered relationships with God and one another we all can reclaim the joy and promise of Christ's coming in our daily work. By making room for authentic, supportive communities where successes, praises, burdens, and even failures are shared, we can rediscover joy in our interactions with those we serve and each other. Let us embrace the truth that even though we cannot always heal patient's bodies, Jesus, the Great Physician, can make all people whole. ★★



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Share a Story

We love uncovering and celebrating the amazing stories within our community. Whether it's your story or someone else's, we'd be thrilled to help tell it. Reach out to our Communications staff at hello@myersparkpres.org.

Feedback

Comments, questions, or ideas for our next issue of *Journey*? We'd love to hear it. Email Josh Richard, Communications Director, at jrichard@myersparkpres.org.

Myers Park
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