

Journey of Faith
By: Rev. Dr. James D. McLeod, Jr

In many ways it seems as if the entirety of my life has been spent searching for the answers to the questions that sit at the base of the human experience. Where some might cast a single stone across the queries of life, my mind feels as if it is always on a quest for deeper understanding and knowledge of the mysteries of life, faith, and God. From the earliest age I can remember my own journey has been undergirded by the Christian Faith and Presbyterian tradition.

Presbyterianism runs deep within my family. My father still attends the Presbyterian church in which he was baptized. My McLeod family tree can be traced back to the early 16th century in Scotland and from that point to the present, everyone of my ancestors has grown their faith in the fertile soil of the Presbyterian Church (Kirk). My own call to the ministry can be first found in that same family church where I would attend with my parents and brothers and sit next to my grandparents. It was there, around the age of ten, that my grandmother, a wise woman who knew the Spirit of God intimately, said she saw the spark of ministry in my soul. Through my formative years, I would be nourished in the safe confines of the church. I was encouraged to ask questions, explore, and learn. I would sit in the pastor's study to talk with him about the previous week's sermon and what curiosities had stirred in my mind. I was active in my youth group, chancel choir, handbells, and Sunday school.

In college, the call to follow Jesus came all the more fervently as I spoke with different professors and chaplains about my own desires to enter into the ministry. I took many college religion classes that sought to locate the mystery of God in literature and scientific study, advancing my own search for the Divine. The last religion course I took in college was a study of different texts from the classic writings of Mary Shelley to the metaphysical inquiries of the astrophysicist Paul Davies. Taught by a Presbyterian Elder, this experience solidified my own desires to pursue the pastoral path and discern a call to seminary.

In seminary, I became a sponge for all the knowledge I could possibly gain and integrate into my understanding. There were days when I would be there when the library opened and closed, to spend most of the day exploring all the different texts the school had on its shelves. The desert fathers, the mystics, John Calvin, Paul Tillich, James Cone, Cornel West, Elizabeth Johnson and Elie Wiesel — all these became my traveling companions.

In the summers I worked for a Presbyterian camp in the Sandhills of North Carolina. On the dock by the lake at the camp, I would sit up at night and look at the stars and think about God and God's son Jesus. I would think about him standing before the 5,000 people hungry for both bread and the Word of God. Jesus fed them. I thought about the nights he must have spent in the Garden of Gethsemane staring up at the same sky and thinking about his own journey. In those times, I believe I was able to better understand the struggles most people face in their own lives and have tried to take those insights with me into each call I have had in the past sixteen years. The place where I derive the greatest meaning and affirmation in my own journey comes in the opportunities that I have had to sit with people who find themselves surrounded by darkness and helping them to see even a faint amount of light.

I have worked in a number of churches in differing regions of the United States, each with their own character, size, and needs. I have also had the opportunity to work in some of the poorest areas of the world, from the borderlands between the United States and Mexico to the undeveloped areas of Malawi. I have seen the need for those of us who seek to better follow Jesus to work for greater justice in order that all people in the world may have dignity, the chance to take care of their families, and can live life and live it in all its abundance.

While I have had the chance to live and work in several places around the world, it is the values and faith I learned sitting next to my grandparents in a church in rural North Carolina that have always been the foundation for whatever else has transpired in my life and walk with Jesus. It is my desire to do all things with that strong base in mind. My hope is that my ministry abides with the Holy Spirit as we move about the world.