

Journey of Faith & Statement of Call

My journey of faith begins before I was even aware of God's grace. Through the divine nature and working of God's Spirit I was able to have relationships with a few influential people throughout my life thus far which have guided me to a deeper understanding of what it means to live a life in dedication and communion with God and others. One of the earliest and most influential people on my Journey was a woman named Mrs. Joyce who was my fourth grade Sunday School teacher. While I do not remember the lessons specifically, she displayed a relational love towards her students which has impacted my life greatly. The time, care, and dedication she displayed to this group of students showed me what it means to care well and give value to others and retrospectively how Jesus Christ has given us the same attention and value. I was actively involved in church from this time throughout my middle school and high school years. While I have never had a singular moment or epiphany, I have always felt drawn to ministry. I felt from a young age that ministry was where I belonged.

The next step of my journey included attending Johnson University, where I studied preaching and youth ministry. It was during these years that I was able to have more opportunities in a variety of ministry roles including worship music, youth ministry, a ministry internship, and a brief summer job as a Director of an urban missions-based camp in Washington D.C. Reflecting on this time I notice now this was the beginning of exploring outside of the denomination I was raised in. I grew up going to a Christian Church (Restoration Movement) and schools in higher education associated with these churches as well. In college, this was the first time I had ever explored churches outside of this movement but never found the right fit. I think this was partly due to my own theology being molded and developed. A few months before my scheduled graduation I was unsure about the next steps. I had a friend in seminary and thought I'd apply just to see if I could get in and have more time to figure out what was next.

I was accepted to Emmanuel Christian Seminary, which was another great and challenging time in life. Throughout seminary, I went through a time of deconstruction and slowly realized the Christian Churches were aligning less with where my theology was. I learned in seminary how much counseling and pastoral care meant to me, and how highly I regard this practice in the church. After seminary, I took a job mostly out of convenience and quickly realized I was in the wrong place for a number of reasons. I really struggled during this time partly due to ministry in the time of Covid-19 and being in a place I knew I didn't belong. Through the help of a mentor, I was able to process some of what I was going through and what I wanted to pursue. My current position became available and after a lot of thought, research, and prayer I felt confident about moving to the PCUSA.

My time at First Presbyterian in Bristol has impacted my faith journey more than I expected. I have been involved in numerous ministry areas and found new ministry areas that bring great joy. I have learned how to organize my time and when to ask for help. A new denomination always presents areas of growth, and this has cultivated a deeper appreciation for the grace we have received through Jesus Christ.

I would say a big part of my faith journey so far has revolved around the idea of belonging. I have a deeply held belief that the church is a place where people should feel like they belong. So far on my journey I feel like I have found a place to belong and my goal is to share that with others by creating relationships, giving value to others, and inviting others into a space where they belong because we see this modeled through the life and work of Jesus Christ.

Given that idea of belonging, I have felt God's Spirit at work in the discernment process and call to First Presbyterian Church, Middletown. In my development so far, I have found certain areas of ministry I am drawn to, specifically pastoral care. While I have been assured of gifting elsewhere in ministry by mentors, I know as a first call pastor I will need time to continue to grow and learn. In my discernment process, I was looking for a church where I could utilize gifts I feel confident in, but also a community willing to allow a young first time pastor to grow. I feel God has led me to FPC Middletown, where those ideals have been made known and met. In many ways, it feels as if the needs and strengths of FPC Middletown and those of mine are complimentary. Where I feel called to serve and what I view as a strength is where the church has identified a major need. In the same way, where I feel less confident, the church seems to be very supportive and willing to walk with me in other tasks of the pastorate, allowing for an abundance of grace. That sense of peace many pray for in situations like this is present. I believe in some ways God has spoken to both the DPNC and myself, giving us words of assurance that we can trust God is at work.

Grace & Peace

-Justin Miller