



## **They Knew My Name**

### **How Early Congregational Life Shaped a Leader**

#### **Judy Fletcher**

From the beginning of my life, my home congregation loved me into the faith. As a preschooler in the nursery, I felt so very safe with “church.” A few years later, in the primary department, I remember standing at the sand table, charting the journeys of Paul or the journey of the Exodus. Little did I know then that such teaching would form the beginning of my knowledge of the Bible and its stories, or that when we were invited to discuss and respond to these stories that it was the beginning of my training to be a leader of the church.

This church of 250 members in Texarkana, Texas, was where, even as a small child, people knew my name. These people knew all the children of the church. They helped raise us and teach us and called our behavior into question when necessary. They made us feel important. Even now, I linger on those words, “they knew my name.”

#### **The Best of Pastors**

In the church’s pastors, I experienced the best of all worlds. The first was my pastor from birth to early adolescence, an intelligent scholar with a doctorate from Princeton who had married my parents in the living room of the manse he lived in for over 30 years, baptized me when I was 12 years old, and participated in my ordination to Word and Sacrament. I remember him preaching eloquently from the Psalms and his frequent use of the word “utterly,” as in being “utterly swept up in the sheer love of God.” When, as an adult, I became deeply involved with the church on a national level, I had long conversations with this pastor--who had been a member of our denomination’s General Assembly Council--on the health of the church he continued to love long after retirement from active ministry. I was blessed to assist with his memorial service when he died at the age of 98. It is most difficult to give words to these experiences and rituals except to say that they were utterly faith-shaping.

The second pastor who influenced my faith and vocational journey was a young pastor who arrived in my Texarkana congregation during my early adolescence. While I remember little of what he offered in Sunday worship, I remember vividly the complete joy I felt in having a pastor who was young, who participated actively in our youth ministry program, and who went to church camp with us. Before school on Tuesday mornings, he and his wife would invite us into their home for devotions and conversation. He was the first pastor I saw wearing Bermuda shorts and tennis shoes. When he smiled, his whole face lit up. We young people loved him and he loved us.

It was during this pastor’s tenure that I experienced the more sinful side of the saints whose names graced the membership roll of my church. A vocal segment of my

congregation found this new, young pastor with his youthful ways an unacceptable replacement for their former pastor of 32 years, despite the fact that he and the retired pastor were good friends who liked and respected each other. I still have vivid memories of people I had loved saying ugly things about this young man. It was not a pretty picture. My sadness at the young pastor's ultimate departure was shared by most of the church's young people. This experience was a pivotal part of my coming of age in the faith; I learned that if I was going to stay in the church I would have to live with the knowledge that sin was not something that was always "out there" but would also, from time to time, rear its head in the hallowed halls of the church. Although I now understand some of the family systems theories and the transition difficulties that will surely occur after long-term pastorates, back then I knew only that I had lost a kind of naivete about the church, and that new knowledge was accompanied with much sadness.

### **Learning to Lead**

In those days, people did not leave the church when there were problems. By sticking it out through difficult times, they modeled for me a level of commitment that is rarely seen today. While I know feelings ran deep, what I saw were people staying in the faith, disagreements and all. Like these other members of our congregation, my family and I stayed active in this church, and the congregation that had brought me to adolescence continued to nurture me. I served in a leadership capacity in the youth ministry program on the local, regional, and statewide levels. I remember feeling blessed and somewhat singled out to serve and lead. I had the gift of leadership, but the people in the congregation helped me develop that gift and make its use possible. They did so for countless other young people as well. While we had various resources available, it was understood that the best Sunday evening fellowship devotionals were the ones we wrote ourselves.

Our leadership training was extended to stewardship as well. I did not know how unusual it was to be in a church in which the youth drew up their needed budget for the year and then made the stewardship visitation calls to the homes of young people to receive their pledges for this program. The stewardship chair would give reports throughout the year on how our financial needs were or were not being met. This experience was invaluable to me and is probably one of the primary reasons why some of my gifts for ministry have been in the area of stewardship and finance.

Another way in which the congregation supported its youth members' development was by allowing us to join the chancel choir--the adult choir--when we entered senior high. This was another experience of being valued and accepted.

I grew to identify with the Reformed tradition, a tradition that emphasizes that we are a connected and related denomination. As my local congregation encouraged and enabled its young people to participate in area and statewide events, they helped us know of this connectionalism. We knew we were a part of something larger than the church on Pine Street. Those experiences were also opportunities for leadership development, since I was

in a denomination that believed that youth and adults share in leadership together, and my congregation gave ample evidence of this commitment.

One key experience beyond my local church had a major impact on my vocational choice. While at a statewide youth conference, I shared with some male pastors (there were no female pastors in my denomination in those days) my thoughts about going into full-time Christian education. It was these pastors who suggested that I consider going through the regular seminary program so that I would be on the same educational level as the pastors with whom I would be working. They were the ones who planted those seeds of my ministerial vocation. About nine years after that I became the seventh woman to graduate from the seminary of my choosing.

### **“Catching” the Faith**

As I reflect on my early congregational experiences and their impact on my vocation, I realize that it was not the infrequent significant things my congregation did but the little things they did week in and week out that molded and shaped me. And, since my family was truly there every time the church doors were opened, there were many opportunities for me to be fed and nourished by the congregation. They taught the values of honesty, integrity, and good work by modeling them. They also shared a deep joy in knowing they numbered among God’s ordinary but beloved children.

It is important to remember that I grew up in a very different culture than those being raised in the church today. Except for occasional people moving in or out, our community was mainly static. People stayed in one place. Churches did not have to compete with a world of other activities for people’s time and attention. Our world was family and friends; work or school; music, dance, or sports; and church. Our lives were safe and blessed. Not only our church but also our town was, for the most part, a safe place in which to live.

I suspect that “catching” the faith from one’s home church is more of a rarity in these days of an upwardly mobile society and lives packed with activities. The exception might be smaller rural churches. I do know I am blessed to have these memories and blessed to live the life my family, pastors, and the members of our congregation taught me to live. Those “ordinary” people number among the saints of the church. They not only knew my name, they knew me and loved me. They encouraged and challenged me to offer my best, and they affirmed me when I did. My response to all this? Praise God, from whom all blessings flow!

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