

FAITH JOURNEY - Mark Piedmonte-Silvoy

I was born in Allentown, PA, where I grew up as a Roman Catholic as did Aimee, my wife of nearly 25 years. We were blessed by our two sons, Lucas, 20 (in his second year at American University in Washington, D.C.) and Samuel, 17, (a high school senior about to graduate with plans to attend the University of Miami beginning in January 2021.) Together, we practiced as Catholics at our church down the street, serving as lectors, youth group leaders and adult retreat planning team members.

Our faith journey took a turn, though, in 2003 when we both began to wrestle with our faith while we also struggled in our marriage. The Spirit met us in the struggle and led us to the First Presbyterian Church of Bethlehem, PA. It was in that faith community where we found healing for our marriage and nourishment for our hungering spirits. We became (very!) active members. Through worship and service we truly learned to love the Lord our God with all our hearts, souls and minds.

It was there, too, that I was mentored and encouraged in a brewing sense that I was called to ordained ministry. In 2007, our family moved to Richmond, VA where I earned my MDiv at Union Presbyterian Seminary (formally Union-PSCE) in 2010. In seminary, I grew exponentially in mind and spirit (and due to great friends with a shared love for barbeque, in body too!) Seminary challenged and inspired me. It also frustrated and nearly broke me at times, but I emerged more ready than ever to love and serve the Lord our God.

We stayed in Richmond another year while I earned a second master's degree in Patient Counseling while working as a full-time resident chaplain at VCU's Medical College of Virginia. I cherish this experience and know that I am a better pastor for it. There is no greater blessing than the trust formed with those at their most vulnerable. And an equal blessing was having a group of trusted companions on the journey to be vulnerable with, while also gleaning from them things that I had not seen in myself. I thank God for my CPE group and still feel their love and support every day in ministry.

I loved the ministry of chaplaincy and considered it seriously as a full-time call, but the pull toward the church was stronger. I was ordained on October 30, 2011 and have since served the Presbytery of Susquehanna Valley in my first call as a solo pastor in two historic rural congregations enjoying a shared ministry in upstate New York: The First Presbyterian Church of Gilbertsville and The Garrattsville United Presbyterian Church. Both churches share often in worship, fellowship, and mission together. This experience has been an immense blessing from the beginning. Trust was formed early, not only with church members but also with the larger community. We have laughed and cried together, standing side-by-side in times of sadness and tragedy while also celebrating new life and new life-giving ministries.

Through all of this, I have learned time and time again the valuable lesson that I am still a human being, and that the sad and hard things do get to me. On my essential daily walks, I wonder often along with the psalmists: "Why?" and "How long?" And along with the Thomas, I lament: Lord, I do not know where you – or I – are going? How will I know the way? But I also know that, in beautiful, quiet moments of silence God speaks to me and somehow I find a way to abide and move forward.

A highlight of my ministry in New York includes building ecumenical partnerships with local pastors and congregations. I believe we can do way more together than we can on our own. I believe this because I've seen it through the Youth Fellowship we were able to build and maintain for several years. The group included Presbyterians, Baptists, Episcopalians, Catholics and others – all committing themselves to the main thing at the center of all faith: love and service in the name of Jesus Christ. In our heyday, the group averaged 15-20 kids per meeting where we had fun learning about our faith and planning and

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implementing ways to live our faith in missional outreach to the community and beyond. The group has diminished over time as students graduated and moved on in life, but the impact on their lives has been palpable.

Other highlights include my work with the Presbytery of Susquehanna Valley. Together with some terrific colleagues, I serve on the Christian Nurture Team, bringing youth together from our many churches to serve on local and out-of-state mission teams. We've also sent two delegations to Triennium (2016 and 2019.) I also serve as a voting member of the Presbytery's Cabinet, as moderator of a member church's Session while in transition, and I served as chair of the CPM for several years.

I, along with my family, have been richly blessed by our experiences here in New York. And yet, somehow, we all know that it is also time to go and we cannot wait to see where the Spirit leads us next!