

Where I am from and How I got to Gloria Dei: Dana Stokes



Early memory: a little white church in the countryside. The small sanctuary has windows on either side opened for a cross breeze. Congregants sit fanning warm, muggy air with handheld paper fans sponsored by a local funeral parlor. I'm supposed to sit quietly in the pew. Not an easy job. Granny gives me a pencil and paper and I pretend to write. Mama allows me to lay my head in her lap during the sermon. Mostly I stare out the open windows, searching for birds.

Early memory: my sister and I walk a half block to my neighbor's house. She teaches Vacation Bible School and fills her wood-paneled station wagon with neighborhood children to take with her to the Baptist church. It's the summer when McDonald's debuts a new burger called the Big Mac. Radio stations have call-in, timed competitions to hear who can list the Big Mac ingredients the fastest. At Bible school we have a similar competition to recite the books of the Bible in order. Two all-beef patties, Matthew Mark Luke John,

special sauce lettuce cheese, Acts Romans I and II Corinthians, pickles onions on a sesame seed bun, ...Jude and Revelation.

Fast-forward to the little church in the countryside, rebuilt – with air-conditioning. My younger sister and I are baptized on the same day. I'm a month shy of my 17th birthday when I give my life to Christ. "Giving one's life." That's how we describe being born again at the Muddy Creek Church of Christ.

One thing about the Church of Christ. The men get what I always thought were the good jobs. Men can be ministers, deacons and ushers. Men preach, pass the offering plate and distribute communion. They teach the adult Sunday school. Women can teach children's Sunday school and make food for the church picnics.

I grew up in the Church of Christ. In college I was very active with Campus Christian Fellowship. After college I attended flight school. I wanted to become a missionary pilot. A Bible college in my hometown of Winston-Salem, North Carolina offered a missionary aviation program. When I applied to the program, I was told they'd never had a female student. I would still have to adhere to the rules of the main campus. No face makeup and I'd have to wear a skirt, even at the airport. This was in the early 1990s. I went across town and applied to the other Bible college, the African-American Bible college. It was close to the airport. I was a flight instructor at that time and would clear my midday schedule. I could afford one class per semester. I loved it there! Still, I was disappointed when my favorite professor advised that I'd make a great minister's wife one day.

I didn't go to church again for fifteen years except to baptize my newborn son in the Methodist Church of my then-husband's family.

Fast-forward again and I'm living in New Jersey, working as a pilot for United Airlines and living with my domestic partner. It occurs to me that if I don't teach my son about God then who will? He's approaching an age where I recall my Methodist cousins attending confirmation class. I worry about this. A lot. Consumed by it is probably a better description.

I'm on a layover in Reno, Nevada, when I have a long conversation with God. The Truckee River runs through downtown Reno. It narrows and spills over rocks at a semi-rapid speed drawing kayakers and swimmers to its cold waters. At the edge of the river I hop from one rock to another until I am surrounded by rapids. I dip my hands into the cold water, sprinkle it on my head and continue my conversation with God. I make a commitment to return to church.

At home we try different local churches and various denominations. We find one with a rainbow flag on their sign. We try others near college campuses. One week we try Gloria Dei. I love the large windows in the sanctuary and find myself staring out them searching for birds. Ian loves Pastor Jack who is preaching that day while the congregation is in the call process for a new minister. What we really like about Gloria Dei is the people. That first day Dick Olson invites us to coffee hour and spends a lot of time talking to Ian about trains. A couple of weeks later Kathy Long asks if Ian would like to have his own Bible. It doesn't take long for Gloria Dei to feel like home.