

I am passionate about the mystery of the Triune God, the Word of God, the Word made flesh, the Body of Christ redeemed by his blood, the power of the Holy Spirit that works in us, among us, because of us and in spite of us! I serve as Superintendent and Chief Missional Strategist for the East Jackson District of the Mississippi Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church. Since July 1 of this year, I am also on a team of four superintendents who together serve the Hattiesburg District.

I am married to Rev. Dr. Joey Shelton, Dean of the Chapel and Director of Church Relations at Millsaps College. We have two daughters, Bailey, 24 (a surprise after 11 years of marriage) and Jessica, 19, (another surprise after 16 years of marriage). My family brings joy, laughter, and truth telling to my life.

I am a native of Picayune, MS, reared in the Southern Baptist tradition where I developed a relationship with God's word through Bible drills and scriptural memorization. The word made flesh in Jesus drew me into a relationship with God as a child. My great-grandmother, an immigrant from Lebanon, discovered Methodism upon her arrival in the U.S. in the early twentieth century. In 1986, I found Methodist theology and ministry resonated with my life. I subsequently joined Oak Grove United Methodist Church, Hattiesburg, MS when I was twenty-one years old.

My degrees in communication have served me in every ministry context. My bachelor's degree is in Radio, Television, and Film and my master's degree is in Public Relations, both from the University of Southern Mississippi.

A single story frames my life. In 1995, as a second career student at Duke University Divinity School, I was invited to sing at a weekly chapel service. After the service, my preaching class professor, Dr. William Turner, approached me and asked, "Where did you learn to sing?" I replied that I did not really know. The best answer I could come up with was, "I took a few voice lessons while in college." He looked discerningly into my eyes and asked again, with more emphasis, "Where did you *learn* to sing?" His sincere intensity forced me to go deeply inside myself.

After months of reflection and prayer, I discovered my earliest memories of music reflected my mother and me sitting at the piano, singing and playing together. I remembered her joy and patience, even as she (unbeknownst to me) was dying with cancer and preparing to leave a young husband and three little children. My song was birthed out of a suffering mother whose faith was deep.

God's redemptive Spirit has transformed my sorrow into hope (Romans 5). (I further discovered that my mother led music at a Methodist church while I was in her womb.) That is where I learned to sing.

The answer to Dr. Turner's spiritual question has defined my calling and every aspect of my ministry. I am drawn to those who are suffering and trust God's hope that does not disappoint. In every ministry appointment, I am called to lead others to join God's mission to be present with those on the margins, oppressed, voiceless, and powerless.

When my husband, Joey, and I married in 1987, we served as volunteer lay youth directors for Oak Grove United Methodist Church, Hattiesburg, MS. The seven years that followed were seasons of discerning our call to full-time ordained ministry. I was serving as church relations director for The United Methodist Hour television and radio ministry and Joey was practicing law. After several months of deep struggle, we answered God's call to attend Divinity School at Duke University. We sold everything and moved to Durham, NC.

The three years of spiritual formation and education at Duke Divinity School were transformational. We were stretched and expanded in ways we could not have imagined, from Dr. Frederick Herzog's liberation theology to Dr. Susan Keefe's church history. We would never be the same.

In 1997, we returned to serve three small membership churches, two rural and one urban. The rural churches taught us to live in community. The urban church taught us how to do church differently with those in our neighborhood.

In December of 1998, I was appointed as Executive Director of The United Methodist Hour television and radio broadcast which reached across the Southeastern United States. As the weekly preacher, I had the privilege of bringing the good news of Jesus to a diverse audience – from church people preparing to attend worship at their local church to inmates in prison. I was ever surprised by the embrace of Jesus' love and grace extended.

In January of 2005, I was appointed as Field Education Director at Duke Divinity School. Assigning 300 students per year to their contextual learning sites demanded deep listening and discernment of both students and churches/extension ministries. Hearing stories of God's activity in these field education experiences was inspiring!

In January of 2008, we returned to Mississippi to serve historic Galloway Memorial United Methodist Church, a flagship congregation birthed in 1836

located across from the state Capitol. The congregation taught us how to follow Jesus between the power of the legislature and the powerlessness of the people who called the streets of Jackson, MS, home.

In July of 2013, I was appointed Director of Connectional Ministries and Communications for the Mississippi Annual Conference. With joy, I had oversight over the discernment process and roll out of a new structure for our conference. We identified our purpose: “The Mississippi Conference - empowered by love, generosity, justice, and apprenticeship – forms spiritual leaders, faith communities, and connections, so more disciples of Jesus Christ transform the world.” We restructured conference staff to be more nimble and effective to accomplish this mission.

In July of 2015, I was appointed as District Superintendent of East Jackson. The 63 churches in the district continue to ignite great ministry as they hone their disciple-making systems and innovate new places for new people. Serving on the cabinet is a joy to my life. Across our theological diversity and the breadth of leadership styles, we have deep trust and an awareness that “iron sharpens iron” (Proverbs 27:17). We also share a great deal of laughter which often serves as a means of grace.

In July of 2022, the MS Conference Cabinet embarked on an experiment. Four superintendents, along with their present appointed districts, will oversee the Hattiesburg District and three superintendents will oversee the Greenwood District. I am privileged to walk with 25 churches in the Hattiesburg District along with the 63 churches in the East Jackson District.

Ministry has allowed me to share countless moments in sacred space and places of pain and suffering with the people of my parishes in hospitals, nursing homes, rehabilitation centers, board rooms, mission stations and residences. We have wept and laughed, sang songs and conversed, spoken and listened, prayed and engaged together in the fellowship of the Triune God. In preaching the gospel, I am called to share from my heart the good news of Jesus’ love that surpasses understanding. In the work of district administration, mission strategy, and connectional systems thinking, my focus is fueled by joining God in what God is already doing (John 5:17).

I am deeply compelled to help the local church to dream God’s dreams for their futures, practice spiritual formation and discernment, birth new spaces for people who don’t know Jesus’ love, form lay and clergy spiritual leaders, and value unity as a gift from the Triune God. Jesus’ prayer in John’s gospel speaks

to us, “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one... (John 17).” I believe the glory that Jesus has given us – the disciples – is demonstrated in our unity as God draws us “in” the life of the Triune God. When we are divisive and demonize one another, how will the world believe that the Father sent Jesus? We are called to embody the prayer of Jesus for one-ness - in how we speak, pray, and trust one another.

I dream of a church that welcomes, includes, and affirms all people – and the diversity of theological perspectives and scriptural interpretation find space to follow Jesus without vilification. I pray for faithful followers of Jesus to be freed from animosity, from the need for power, and return to Jesus’ clarity of the greatest commandment: “to love God with your heart, soul, and mind and your neighbor as yourself.”

In this complex season in the life of our beloved United Methodist Church, I sense that my communications educational formation and practice will serve our church well. We desperately need episcopal leaders who take the role of communication seriously and innovate new ways of connecting the connection.

My deep covenant relationships are across the theological, racial, educational, socio-economic and geographic spectrum. I don’t “tolerate” diversity. I deeply value diversity. The deep convictions of faithful disciples of Jesus are demonstrated in multiplicity of thought, interpretation, word, and deed. I believe Jesus Christ is inviting us to bear witness to the breadth of his Church, where, through baptism, *we are incorporated into God’s mighty acts of salvation*. We offer ourselves *in praise and thanksgiving as a holy and living sacrifice in union with Christ’s offering for us*.