

KEPT: A Faith Carried Forward

A Confirmation Retreat at the Church of the Good Shepherd, Sonora, Texas

"He who keeps you will not slumber." — Psalm 121:3

Last week, seven confirmation-age students gathered for something that doesn't happen very often: they spent Thursday evening through Saturday morning living inside a closed church, sleeping in its sanctuary, preparing meals in its kitchen, and asking together what it means to keep a faith that someone else carried here before them.

The students came from the churches that my husband Jim and I serve in Junction and Rocksprings. We had hoped to include students from Tres Rios congregations as well, but others who had planned to come had conflicts come up. Thus, we viewed this gathering as a first run, a chance to work out the curriculum and the logistics. We plan to present it again at another time with Tres Rios youth.

The Place

The Presbyterian Church of the Good Shepherd in Sonora was officially dissolved earlier this year, and the building came under the management of an administrative commission of the presbytery. The congregation, chartered in 1947, could no longer continue as an active worshipping community after several years of dwindling membership that many rural areas are experiencing. Three adult leaders — including Jim and me — joined the seven students, making a group of ten. On the first night, everyone found a spot in the sanctuary: some stretching out on pew cushions pulled down to the carpet, others making the best of the pews themselves, sleeping bags and pillows tucked into spaces where worshippers had sat for decades.

The building itself turned out to be the most powerful teaching tool of the weekend: a hymnal left in a pew, an old printer in the corner of an office, handwritten instructions for running the fellowship hall projector found in a closet, a kitchen that had hosted potlucks and receptions of all kinds for years. The students noticed these things without being told to, and the questions they raised — *Who sat here? What did they believe? Why did they keep coming?* — turned out to be exactly the questions we were there to explore.

Keeping This Place: The Mission Project

On the morning after their first night "camping out," the students and leaders spent several hours doing something tangible for the building that hosted them. Working in teams, they washed windows, scrubbed bathrooms, cleaned kitchen surfaces and inside cabinets, mopped, vacuumed, and swept floors throughout the building, and swept the front sidewalks.

Before we started, I gathered everyone briefly and showed them the church's scrapbook from its 50th Anniversary Celebration — a treasured record of the congregation's founding, its charter members, the families it had served, former pastors, and decades of photographs. For me, personally, it is like looking at a family album as I am kin to some founding members and their families. Then I offered a frame for the work ahead: *We are keeping this place — not just cleaning it, but honoring the faith that was kept here, and saying that there is still a Presbyterian presence in this community.* The students understood. They got to work.

What "KEPT" Means

The retreat takes its name from Psalm 121, the passage that anchored everything we did. The word *keeper* appears five times in that psalm — "The Lord is your keeper" — and the theme runs through every session and activity. It runs in three directions at once.

First, God keeps us. Second, the church, as the body of Christ, has kept faith across centuries of schism, reformation, and migration — from Jerusalem to Geneva to Scotland to the Scots-Irish frontier to Texas. The people who once filled the sanctuary at Good Shepherd kept their faith there, Sunday after Sunday, for as long as they were able. And third, now a new question is put to a new generation: *Will you be one of the keepers?*

What We Learned

The retreat moved through five sessions across three days, each one building toward the most personal question of all.

Session 1 — Carried Here: We traced the long road the Christian faith has traveled to reach us — from Pentecost through the early creeds, the Great Schism, the Reformation, Calvin in Geneva, Knox in Scotland, the Scots-Irish migration to America, and the eventual planting of Presbyterian congregations in Texas. Students added to a running Timeline Wall that grew all weekend, built collaboratively from what they already knew and what they were learning.

Session 2 — Grounded: We spent time with the foundations that most all Christians share — the Apostles' Creed read slowly and discussed phrase by phrase, the Lord's Prayer explored as a model for all prayer, and an overview of how Presbyterians read and interpret Scripture. The Gospel of Luke served as our representative text: expansive, inclusive, Spirit-filled.

Session 3 — Reformed: We explored what makes Presbyterians distinctively Presbyterian — the Five Solas of the Reformation (Scripture alone, grace alone, faith alone, Christ alone, glory to God alone), the priesthood of all believers, freedom of conscience, and the conviction that the Holy Spirit works most reliably through communities of discernment. We also sorted through how PC(USA) relates to other Presbyterian denominations and what the Book of Order requires in worship versus what can vary by congregation.

Session 4 — Organized: We walked through Presbyterian polity — from congregation to Session to Presbytery to Synod to General Assembly — and talked honestly about what membership actually means and requires. Frederick Buechner's definition of vocation anchored our closing: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep need meet."

Session 5 — Kept: On the final morning, the students gathered in quiet to write their personal statements of faith in their own words. Some shared aloud. All left with something they had written for themselves.

Closing Worship: "We Are the Keepers"

The retreat closed with worship in the sanctuary. Psalm 121 was read responsively. We followed the ancient practice of Lectio Divina, or Holy Reading — listening to Scripture slowly and prayerfully across multiple readings, jotting down words or phrases that caught us, and sitting with whatever invitation we sensed God might be offering.

In the pastoral reflection, I offered this word to the students — and to anyone who has wondered what it means when a congregation comes to an end:

The saints who worshipped in this place did not fail. They were faithful to the end — they came through hard times and kept coming, held each other's babies at baptism and stood by each other's graves, and kept the doors open as long as the final few members could manage it. That is not failure. That is faithfulness. They finished what God had planned for them for that time and place. With every ending, God opens to us the possibility of new beginnings — new forms, new purposes, new people who will carry what was kept here into what comes next.

Worship ended with a prayer of commission for each student as they prepared to return to their home churches, meet with their sessions, and complete their confirmation through a public affirmation of faith in an upcoming worship service.

What Comes Next

This retreat was, I hope, only the beginning of what this building might offer — for the presbytery and for the people of Sutton County. We are actively exploring using the Church of the Good Shepherd as a regular gathering space for Tres Rios Presbytery events. One possibility in early development is a ministry leader retreat, drawing leaders from across the presbytery for renewal and fellowship, with overnight lodging at a nearby motel, unless they REALLY want to sleep in the sanctuary.

I don't believe God's plans for a Presbyterian presence in the Sonora area have ended. The congregation of Good Shepherd fulfilled its calling faithfully. This is not the last chapter — it is an intermission, as new possibilities are being investigated and brought to fruition.

A note on the curriculum: I am currently editing and refining the materials used for this retreat, with plans to create a version that can be used in any church setting — or at least with clear notes on what a leader would want to adapt for their own context. If you're interested in using it with your confirmation class or youth group, please reach out to me directly or contact Theresa at the presbytery office.

*"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race,
I have kept the faith." 2 Timothy 4:7*

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