Rev. Thomas W. Summers – Faith Biography

Throughout my life, my participation in the church has been very important. I was born and raised in the City of Philadelphia, and was baptized shortly after birth at Glading Memorial Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia.

Some of my earliest memories involve being at the church, attending Sunday School and worship weekly. As I grew older, I was a member of the Boy Scout Troop at Glading Church and participated in both junior high and senior high youth ministry groups. In the fall and winter I played in the church basketball league and in summer often played in the church softball team. Looking back now, all of the activities of my life were connected to the church. My two closest friends were the sons of ministers, and consequently church was at the center of all things.

Like many people in their later teenage years and young adulthood, I did drop out of church for some time. After graduating from high school, I went away to college and drifted aimlessly. I didn't think I needed to deal with any aspects of faith.

I dropped out of college after one year, moved back to Philadelphia, and spent most of my time either working or volunteering at a Philadelphia Council Boy Scout Camp in Bucks Country, PA. I was still drifting aimlessly though, until I met the woman who became my wife.

After Deborah and I began to date, we started attending worship services at Glading Church, and I found myself becoming active in church life again. We became members of a young adult group, participated in Bible Studies, and during this time I was beginning to struggle with aspects of my faith, and more importantly what I was doing in my life. In many ways I still felt as if I was adrift.

Back in the early 1980's, living in a fairly comfortable environment, I was seriously questioning my place and purpose. During this time, in the community where I was living, there was a growth in the number of homeless people living on the streets. My wife and I often commented that someone should do something about this problem. But one night in an after-dinner conversation, Deborah and I agreed that WE had to do something.

We began meeting with other church members in the community, met and began to build connections with Community Pastors, and we ended up starting a ministry of outreach and compassion for the men and women on the streets. At the same time, I had the opportunity of working with a group of local Methodist churches that were providing outreach to homeless and marginalized youth in the same community.

I was beginning to feel a deep sense of purpose in those days, and recognized that my faith was growing deeper. The Church has always been a place where I felt most comfortable, and as I became more involved, I began to feel sense of calling.
I didn't really understand it at first, and struggled to articulate what I was experiencing.

I was fortunate to have several Presbyterian Pastors who helped me explore my faith and practice, and they helped me to discern a call to ministry. In 1982 I was ordained as a Deacon at Glading Presbyterian Church, and discovered real joy as I engaged in visiting members of the church, especially visits to older adults and shut ins.

My wife and I spent many hours talking things through, and in September of 1983, I resigned from my job and started studying at Eastern College in St, Davids, PA. I wasn't sure where this would lead me, but I certainly was open to the possibilities. I decided to major in Biblical Studies, and immersed myself is learning. During this time I continued to work with the homeless, with youth ministry, and eventually teaching adult Bible study classes.

I discovered a sense of meaning and purpose, and realized I had a calling to be in ministry full time. In my last year of college (1985), the Session of Glading Church endorsed me to become a Candidate for Ministry in the Presbytery of Philadelphia. I applied and was accepted to Princeton Theological Seminary in September of 1985. During my time of study at Princeton Seminary, a couple of Student Internships in congregations, and during two units of Clinical Pastoral Education at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital in New Brunswick, New Jersey, my sense of calling to the ordained Pastoral ministry was strengthened. The guidance of the Candidates Committee (as it was called in those days) reinforced my desire to be ordained as a Teaching Elder.

In my career as a PC(USA) Pastor, through Pastoral visitations in good times and in bad times, the ability to lead worship and preach, to lead Bible Studies was a constant reminder of my place in the church, and I found it to be always affirming. I consider myself to be lucky to be surrounded by colleagues in ministry that enabled me to continue growing in my faith.

The place where my calling, my ministry and my understanding of faith was tested and challenged was when I took a position as a Hospice Chaplain, and later as a Chaplain at a Presbyterian based Senior Living community. Dealing with issues of life and death, I found a new appreciation for the Confessional heritage of the Presbyterian Church. I found great spiritual strength through continual wrestling with documents such as the Heidelburg Catechism, and a strong reminder that, as a baptized Christian and a Teaching Elder, I belong to my faithful Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Although I am now retired from full time active Pastoral ministry, I do believe I have gifts and skills to offer the church and recognize a need to stay connected to the faith community within the Presbyterian Church (USA).

Rev. Thomas W. Summers - Statement of Faith

My life and my faith are shaped by a belief in the One True God, revealed to us in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. The God I worship and serve is eternal, invisible, omnipotent, and omnipresent. God is revealed to us as One, yet in three distinct ways: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Scripture declares that God our Heavenly Father has created ex nihilo all things in heaven and on earth, all things visible and invisible, and has faithfully sustained all things through God's faithfulness and loving kindness. We are reminded that as the mighty acts of Creation were completed, God declared that everything made was exceedingly good. Humans are created as male and female in the very image and likeness of God, and they are crowned with glory and honour and called to live in communion with God. God has freely chosen to create covenant with humans throughout the ages, calling us to live in community with God and with each other. God acts always with faithfulness, graciousness and redemption.

Our common human nature, however, is prone to corruption and weakness, and we seek to establish our own rules and guidelines for our lives. This can quickly lead us to turn from obedience to God's will, we turn from God and we turn against others. On our own, we are unable to save ourselves. We need God's actions in history if we are to have any hope.

Jesus Christ, God's only begotten Son, is revealed in Scripture as fully human and fully divine. Incarnate by the Holy Spirit, born of Mary, he came into this world for us and for our salvation. For me personally, the words of the Heidelburg Catechism, Question 1 have taken a prominent role in all that I have done in my life, and still stand at the center of my faith, my ministry, and my life. Put simply, as a human being, as a Christian, as a Teacher, Pastor in and for the Church of Our Lord Jesus Christ, my only comfort is that I belong.

I belong to Christ Jesus, because of what He has done. He has paid fully for my sins, and believe me, they are many. He has freed me from the dominion of the devil, even when I would prefer to wallow comfortably in a shallow existence, and His protection surrounds me completely, even when I would choose to live recklessly. I belong to Him. I have no choice, for He has claimed me in the Sacrament of Baptism. He has chosen me, and called me, and sent me, even when I did not want to go. But that does not matter. Even in those moments of doubt and questioning, in those moments when I did not believe in Him, He believed in me.

With the Reformed Tradition, I confess that Jesus Christ, as he is attested to us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death (Barmen Declaration).

The Holy Spirit, of the same substance and equal to God the Father and God the Son, is the Lord and Giver of Life, omnipresent, at work in and through the world, at work in and through the Church, and at work in and through our lives.

It is the Holy Spirit who brings grace through faith and frees us to serve our Triune God in the body of Christ, the Church.

The Holy Spirit was the inspiration of the prophets and apostles who wrote the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, the unique and authoritative witness to God's actions in this world. The Holy Spirit continues to be active in engaging believers in the study and proclamation of the Word of God.

The Church of Jesus Christ is One Holy, Apostolic and Universal, and includes women and men of every nation and from every time and place. The Church is the community of the faithful who seek to worship and serve God through Christ Jesus. As those who have received forgiveness through Christ's sacrifice on the cross, the Church is called to witness to God's acts of reconciliation and salvation in our broken world. When the Church meets for worship and to read and study the Word of God, to be fed and nourished through the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, the community is renewed and sent forth into the world to demonstrate God's love and to be God's instruments of reconciliation.

In the acts of worship, the community is nurtured and strengthened through the reading of Scripture, the proclamation of the Word or God, and through Sacraments of the Church. There are but two Sacraments: Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

The Sacrament of Baptism is a clear and present sign of the covenant of grace. In Baptism we are marked as the sons and daughters of God and it symbolizes our entrance into the Christian community. In Baptism we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. We are united with Christ Jesus in his death and resurrection, and receive the promise of newness of life and of eternal life.

The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper is again a clear and present sign of the covenant of grace. Celebrating the Passover with his disciples before his arrest and crucifixion, Jesus instituted for us a new covenant relationship in the taking of the bread and the wine. Here at the table, we are joined with Christ as we eat the bread, and share in his broken body. As we drink from the cup, we remember that his blood has been poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins (Matthew 26:28). Partaking of this meal we are again united with Christ in his death and resurrection, and we have a foretaste of the heavenly banquet which will come when Christ our Saviour comes again.

Nurtured in the community of faith, nourished by the preaching of the Gospel and participation in the Sacraments, assured that the promises of God made through the ages are true, I trust and believe that Christ will come again and all of creation will be renewed. The bottom line for me is, as always, in life - and in death! – I belong to my Savior Jesus Christ, and even death is not the last word. Eternal Life is what awaits. And I look forward to that. It will be glorious.