

## Rev. Dr. Vicki Gordy-Stith

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How thrilled I am to have the opportunity to meet you all and be offered the privilege of serving God and the community of Rehoboth together with the saints at Epworth UMC! Your work with people in the community and in collaboration with other area churches inspires me. Such faithfulness only arises from a deep relationship with God. I look forward to joining you in this holy endeavor.

Dr. Sa asked me to introduce myself to you through this letter. What a daunting task! I thought I would share with you some of my life experiences which have shaped the person who I am and my experience of church. Several years ago, I discerned my life's mission as: ***illumine, nurture, and heal the child of God in each person, particularly the spiritually marginalized, so that they experience the depth of God's love for them in the core of their being and become free to love others in response.***

God shines the light of love to display a broader picture of inclusion in the body of Christ. I feel called to channel that love to **ILLUMINE** the child of God in every person. This desire arises from several life experiences. I had an older, developmentally-disabled brother and watched the judgment we received from within and outside the church. Some people thought he was less than fully human. Therefore, recognizing that God creates **people of all abilities** matters to me, as does inclusion into the body of Christ. Also, my first memories of church came from Silverbrook UMC, an intentionally integrated church in Wilmington at a time when much of society viewed African Americans as less than fully human. My passion for **racial reconciliation** comes from a longing to return to a diverse congregation like Silverbrook, where we learned to see the image of God in people of all colors. We also had a son, Elijah, whose birth mother was African American and birth father was Puerto Rican. He naturally included diverse cultures among his friend group, which again illumined the image of God in everyone. As our children became teenagers, we developed relationships with their friends, many of whom described themselves as spiritual but did not attend church. Seeing God illumined in their lives led me to design my doctoral project around creating community for people who consider themselves **"spiritual but not religious."** Through this project, I watched the Holy Spirit illumine the divine nature through these "outsiders" whom God also created.

Through encounters such as these, the Holy Spirit empowers us to grow and develop our unique gifts to serve others. I believe God has called me to **NURTURE** the gifts of others, so that they reflect their best selves. As part of the sixth class at the U.S. Naval Academy to admit women, we received more than our share of abuse and harassment. These experiences taught me to keep doing the right thing even in the face of obstacles. The Spirit nurtured my sense of confidence in my abilities and strength and perseverance. As a result, I always **look for people's strengths** in the midst of both trials and healthy seasons, to help develop the gifts and graces God has given them. In addition to leadership classes at Annapolis, my time in the Navy also served as a leadership lab, where I learned the value of **team work**, the importance of every team member, and the vital role of **constant learning and reflecting**. These lessons translated into my service as a pastor, as I spend time nurturing the faith and the gifts of every person in the church, beginning with the leadership team.

In nurturing others, I have experienced Jesus' presence bringing healing in our midst. So, I feel the Spirit's call to participate with Jesus and **HEAL** people, particularly those on the margins. As a teenager, I participated in several Appalachian Service Project mission trips. Once I asked the coordinator why we were building a porch for a family who had no indoor plumbing. He explained that ASP always asks families how they wish to be helped. While we may value indoor plumbing, this particular family hosted

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family every weekend and wanted a place to gather. I remember thinking then about how Jesus often asked people: "What do you wish for me to do for you?" Jesus invites people to **participate in their own healing**, and also **restores them to community**. When my heart joins Jesus' heart in longing for people's healing, I remember to invite their participation and the community's participation.

In 2004, we had a chance to invite the community to participate in healing. While serving as Co-Pastor at Skyline UMC, we had a couple approach us asking if they would be accepted at our church, since they were a lesbian couple. We replied that of course we would accept them, but wanted to be able to assure them that the community would accept them as well. The group, Grace for All, began meeting there and we began holding dialogue in our congregation. Sadly, many people just did not even want to talk about it, and some of them even left. However, one Sunday morning, long after we had decided as a congregation to be inclusive, a man named John visited. He came back the next week with his partner and told us that we were the 15<sup>th</sup> church they had visited, so many that his partner had given up on **finding a place where they would be accepted**. I will never forget the joy of the healing Jesus gave them, as they came to know in the core of their being the depth of God's love for them.

At Skyline, I also developed several friendships with people who were in recovery. One of them wanted a way to integrate her "spiritual" 12-step program and her relationship with Jesus. We partnered with others in recovery and began a worship service based on the 12-steps, called "Spirit of Serenity." We never grew beyond 20 people, probably because of the format we used in staying together as one large group. However, I saw Jesus heal more people in those worship times than I did with the multitude who had attended "regular" worship. As a result, I feel a passion for participating in the community which helps Jesus **offer healing to those struggling with addiction**.

A little over a year ago, my youngest son, Elijah, whom we **adopted from foster care**, died from a single gunshot wound to his head. The circumstances surrounding his death remain unclear to this day. We knew that we probably would not get justice in this world. As Bo and Joy and Eli and I stood around his bed, having anointed him with oil and singing to him while we waited for the team to take him to donate his organs, we promised ourselves that we would get help as needed in our grief, and that we would find a healthy way to seek justice. In response to his death, I joined **Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America**, as the Dover Local Leader. I do not want any other family to go through what we have endured. So, I tell our story as we encourage safer gun legislation, from red flag laws to universal background checks to military-grade weapons bans. I have found so much healing in telling my story and using my pain to work for justice and protection for others. Through sharing our stories, and including the ways our stories intersect God's story, Jesus offers us release and healing. I look forward to sharing our stories with each other as we journey together.

**As you can tell from these stories, I hold inclusion and developing people and community outreach as a healing gift as some of my highest values.** May we participate with our Creator, with Jesus, and with the Spirit to illumine, nurture, and heal each other and our community. One day, I pray everyone will know the depth of God's love for them and we will transform our world through the power of that love.