

From Zimbabwe to Perkins by Way of Courage

“Ndirizvandiri nekuda kwevakanditenderedza.” I am because we are. In the Shona language, Christinah Kwaramba’s mother tongue, room must be made in order to accommodate all the letters—39 to be exact—in the proverb she has just quoted. At the same time, all those letters, taken together, provide plenty of material for building a foundation upon which to grow a life such as hers. An umbilical Methodist, Christinah was born to parents whose parents were themselves converted to Christianity in Zimbabwe by British Methodist missionaries. The name given her paternal grandmother at her baptism two generations ago is now her own: Christinah. *Christian.*

We sometimes think of calling as an inner experience confirmed by the surrounding faith community. In Christinah’s case, the process was somewhat reversed. “My pastor and church family identified that I had a gift,” she explains. “I just kept on participating in these leadership roles as they were given to me. And as I did I grew better equipped.” She found fulfillment in her serving, and was well on her way to answering God’s call for her in pastoral ministry in the United Methodist Church.

Other forces, however, were to slow her progress. Zimbabwe’s struggle for independence in the early 1970s closed many churches and threatened the wellbeing of many church leaders. Some years later, as a young mother of two, recurring illness required 21 hospitalizations for Christinah, and as many surgeries.

Following the last surgery, Christinah had an experience that would confirm her childhood calling for good. “I was in the recovery room, coming back to consciousness, and I had something like a vision.” She searches for English words to describe the mystical—difficult enough to do in our native tongue. “I was on a mountain full of people sick with leprosy. I had never seen leprosy in my life, but this was the disease afflicting all of these people. And it appeared as though I was the one preaching to these people, going to them one by one, laying hands on them.”

“As I went to each one, I said, ‘In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.’ And as I spoke these words and laid my hands on their heads, their fingers would be restored, or their hands, or their mouth. They were being healed.” The Shona saying that “I am because we are” had manifested itself in a rather different way. This time, it was the needy ones in the world around her who shaped Christinah’s identity as a pastor-to-be.

Once recovered from surgery, Christinah was assigned to pastor a church in the capital city of Harare. In her second year as pastor, her husband, Tinashe, was diagnosed with cancer of the esophagus. Two years later, he died, and Christinah fell into grief. *Usiku igore* is a common saying in her culture. “The night is like a year.” Besides shouldering the weight of grief, Christinah also felt another pressing concern: her inability, on a pastor’s meager salary, to support her two children. Once again the wide wisdom saying

crowded this ragged page of her life: Christinah's bishop and congregation stood with her through her grief; they found resources to support her family; they even encouraged her to return to school—this time to seminary at Africa University—and secured funds for her to do so.

Soon after completing seminary in 2005, Christinah was appointed to serve as chaplain for the Old Mutare Mission, consisting of an orphanage, primary school, and hospital. There she salvaged joy from her own heartache and offered that blessing to those “lepers” who had occupied her dream—the least and the last of her own society—“in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”

Though military upheaval had subsided years before, Zimbabwe was still a hotbed of political unrest. On one occasion, without warning, Christinah was summoned to the presidential office in Harare, a sign that she had somehow seriously provoked the authorities. It was not uncommon to be so summoned and never heard from again. In this instance, word had come to the government that earlier that week she had preached a politically subversive sermon. She arrived, under escort, at the presidential office, and found herself “in a room of fifteen people, all looking very fierce.” Confronted with the charge of subversion, she was told to defend her sermon. “I don't defend my sermons,” she told her interrogators. “I only preach them. If you want the sermon defended, you must speak to the one who put it on my lips.” “But what did you say in your sermon?” they demanded. “If you like, I will preach it to you here; then you will know.” She then proceeded to do just that, turning the star chamber into a chapel, and preached, she says, “as if it might be my very last sermon ever.”

Her text was from Proverbs 29: *Without a vision the people perish*. The sermon was pointedly prophetic, but like a dog trying to bite a basketball, the authorities had difficulty identifying the subversion within it. The lions' jaws were shut. Christinah was released.

Within a year, the crowd of witnesses had again surrounded Christinah to help her take another step in becoming the servant leader God had called her to be, this time in the form of an opportunity to attend Perkins School of Theology in Dallas to pursue advanced theological studies. Providing scholarship funds, housing, help with transportation, and academic guidance, Perkins paved the way for Christinah to study in Dallas in preparation to return to her home better equipped to serve the church of Jesus Christ. After completing her MTS, Christinah hopes to secure further support for advanced studies toward a PhD. Her experience as a pastor is only matched by her desire to further her learning and her leadership in the church she has loved, and that has loved her, through thick and thin.

The Shona wisdom saying had once more proven its worth, this time through the vision and generosity of United Methodists a hemisphere away who speak a different language, live a different culture, but know and serve the same God. “*Ndirizvandiri nekuda kwevakanditenderedza.*” Christinah is because we are. In turn, it should be said, we are because she is. Thanks be to God.

Three Perkins Students Blend Residence, Disciplines, and Mission Through Epworth Project

“Alamo Lane” presents an interesting juxtaposition of ideas: *Alamo*, a fortress within which one seeks protection; *lane*, a street that invites a meandering stroll on a Sunday afternoon. It is precisely that sort of juxtaposition in which the modest experiment of Epworth Project, located on Alamo Lane in Garland, Texas is engaged. A residence for three Perkins students, Epworth Project is a home, a haven, and a place of intentional and cloistered *koinonia*; but it is also a sending station, a springboard, a mission center from which its residents seek to reach out in compassionate witness to neighbors far and wide, beginning with the next house over. It is a home, and it is a home *base*.

It all began as a concept emerging from conversations between Dr. Elaine Heath, McCreless Assistant Professor of Evangelism at Perkins, who is also a Garland resident, and neighborhood friends. Dr. Heath has for some time been a student of the “New Monasticism,” a movement combining shared residence in a context of communal disciplines with a missional orientation. Late in the summer, a house became available, three interested students were identified, and Epworth Project was born.

Megan Davidson, Leanne Lindgren, and Amy Proctor are those three students. To hear them speak of their decision to enter into this relationship, and their experience since beginning the undertaking, is to hear overtones of a graceful tension between inward and outward focus, between “cloister” and “community,” between “Alamo” and “lane.”

“In a certain sense,” Megan observes, “it’s paradoxical . . . a gathering of students for the purpose of living together, but also for the purpose of turning outward toward the community.” Establishing that inward/outward titration is perhaps more art than science. The group shares its home freely with friends and family who come by to visit, hang out for the afternoon, or enjoy a home cooked meal around a large kitchen table with a story all its own. But when the time comes for night prayers (10 p.m.), the Epworth residents graciously but deliberately narrow that circle back down to three, and the cloistered dimension reemerges. “There’s an inherent polarity in this arrangement,” Leanne explains. “When to invite, open our doors, welcome others in; when to say, ‘It’s time to pray; we need this time now . . .’ Establishing and maintaining those boundaries is an ongoing process.”

Amy offers additional perspective: “Ideally you’d want them (cloister and community) to be together. The more you encounter Christ in your journey, the more that happens; what we *get* as a community together enables us to *give* to our wider community.” The group considers their endeavor a work in progress. As Megan describes it, “How we relate to one another, how we relate to those around us, address needs of people next door and

across the street . . . we're still dreaming about what this is all going to look like. We don't want to force it, but rather to be receptive to the Holy Spirit."

All three residents speak of the importance Perkins has played in their Epworth Project experience, both in doing necessary theological work and in discerning how to apply theory to practice. "Theology is at its best when it's *done*," Megan explains. "When it's a verb, not a noun." Applying theory to practice, moving from classroom to community, has been, for Amy, Leanne, and Megan, a natural outgrowth of their Perkins experience.

On a recent afternoon, Amy and Megan are out for a walk along their street, the lane called "Alamo." Amy's golden retriever, Walker, is along for the stroll. They encounter an older woman, perhaps a grandmother, pushing a stroller and holding the hand of a second small child. As they approach, the woman instinctively draws the children back from Walker. It's an Alamo moment. "I think she's friendly," the little boy says to the woman. Somewhat hesitantly, the grandmother allows the little boy to approach, until he stands eye to eye with Walker. "Say 'Nice to meet you,'" Amy tells the boy. When he does so, Walker raises a paw, offering a handshake. The child accepts it, his face beaming. A conversation follows, bringing new neighbors into new relationship; it's one small step toward the peaceable reign of God in Garland, Texas. Between a seminary's shared vision, a house on Alamo Lane, and a dog's paw, theology has found its way to practice, and strangers now are friends.

Walker Discovers The United Methodist Church, Then Perkins

"I am so thrilled to be at this school." Those are remarkable words coming from one who, just a few short years ago, was a self-described agnostic who had no use for religious institutions, or Christianity, of any sort. "My exposure to religion was largely from negative voices," explains Joel Walker, now a second-year M.Div. student at Perkins. "The Jesus I knew in my agnostic days was the one I would see the television preachers present, narrow and judgmental."

As a young adult, Joel developed a deep commitment to matters of economic justice, sexual ethics, and the environment. Having attended college to pursue his interest in natural resource management, he took a job in that field, and found his way to organizations that shared his commitments. By roundabout means, his path began to cross those of clergy and congregations who shared similar concerns. Eventually, Christianity ceased to be seen as a contradiction of Joel's convictions and began to become an appealing possibility as a framework and guide for his own thinking.

“I had a conversion experience in 2003. That’s when I really dedicated my life to Christ.” Soon after, Joel became involved at St. John’s UMC in Lubbock, Texas, sharing common interests on gay and lesbian concerns and the environment with church members there. In that setting, Joel was immediately identified as a gifted and energetic communicator, and in the spring of 2007 was tapped to help draft environmental concerns legislation from the church to bring to General Conference, meeting the following year in Fort Worth. The legislation made it to committee, then to the plenary, where it was approved for inclusion in the Book of Resolutions. (*See adjacent page for excerpt.*)

In the course of that drafting work, Joel was in his element. He knew the subject, he knew the facts. What he didn’t know was that people of faith could care about the environment and the poor for *theological* reasons rather than merely *humanitarian* reasons. As he immersed himself further into this volunteer role, he began to make new faith connections between his past, his present, and . . . his future.

Within months, Joel was making plans to attend Perkins School of Theology as an M.Div. student. “Inside Perkins,” an introduction to Perkins for those considering theological studies, had been, for Joel, “a colossal experience.” Even so, there were moments before Joel’s first semester began that his agnostic past sounded its voice. “I was nervous and skeptical that I could really make it in a religious school. I thought to myself, ‘Have you just made a mistake in coming here? Do you really fit in at a place like this?’”

Those doubts evaporated the moment the semester was underway. “As soon as I started attending class, listening to my professors lecture, I discovered that they care deeply about humanity, and also have a passion for God.” A year into his studies, Joel has come to regard Perkins with a perspective very different than the initial ambivalence he brought with him to campus as a new student. “In my judgment, Perkins is like a beacon. I’m being renewed here, strengthened, and sharpened in my thinking and beliefs. This school has made the gospel come alive in a way I could make sense of it, apply it to life. Had I been exposed to what Perkins does at a younger age that would have made so much difference. It’s been very enlightening.”

In a few short years, Joel has found both a faith home and a faith community. In the context of his experience of faith and seminary, the words of this recent convert from agnosticism to Christianity now make all the sense in the world. “I’m so thrilled to be at this school.” It shows.

Gholston Selected as Texas Delegate to Democratic National Convention

Willacin Gholston was born to politics. And to theology. The fact is she regards them as inseparable. So it felt completely natural for her to involve herself in politics when she arrived in Texas to study theology at Perkins. Her initiative led her from local Democratic activities to the state convention, then on to Denver this past summer as a

Texas delegate to the Democratic National Convention. “I’m passionate about justice for all persons. This was a wonderful opportunity for me to step out and put all I have been learning into practical application.” Willacin credits her college studies as well as Perkins courses such as “Church in the Social Context,” “Introduction to Theology,” “Systematic Theology,” and “Moral Theology” for laying the groundwork for her theology of social involvement.

Willacin is currently completing her internship in a hospital chaplaincy program at Methodist Hospital in Dallas. She is an ordained deacon in the AME Church.

Gholston on the Democratic National Convention

“The whole convention was a beautiful experience, but there was one moment that filled my heart and made history in the same instant. On Thursday, August 28, 45 years to the day after Martin Luther King, Jr. gave a speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial about a dream of racial equality, 84,000 people from every state in the union filled INVESCO Field to witness Senator Barack Obama become the first African-American in our nation’s history to accept the nomination of a major party as a candidate for the presidency.

In that moment, my eyes filled with tears. I thought of my mother, who grew up in the segregated South, prohibited from using new textbooks and from riding the school bus, and of my father, who served overseas in the military and returned home to a segregated country. I thought of my greatgrandfather, born into slavery in South Carolina.

As Senator Obama offered his acceptance speech, an elderly white man seated to my left, a retired circuit court judge, had tears in his eyes. In the row behind me, a Latino man held up a sign that read, “HISTORY IN THE MAKING.” He, too, was crying.

The significance of this moment was something all of us were feeling profoundly. In a way, it was a Galatians 3 moment: ‘There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female . . .’”

Spiritual Growth—In the Classroom

Michelle Morris

Master of Divinity student

Graduating class of 2009

I expected to come to seminary and become more fluent in the study of God. What I did not expect was to become a healthier, more fulfilled person who is much better prepared to give my whole life in service to the Lord. This unexpected and welcome latter effect has been due largely to the nurturing, grace-filled community of Perkins.

Much of this growth has taken place inside the classroom. I cannot think of a single course that did not push me to grow in my relationship with God and neighbor, but a few

courses stand out as highlights. My very first semester, I took Interpretation of the Old Testament I with Dr. Roy Heller. That course changed my life. Want proof? I love the *Book of Leviticus* now. Leviticus! If you are unmoved by Dr. Heller's teaching, then you must be sleeping through class. Dr. Elaine Heath taught Evangelism in a way that led to healing within my soul. Believe me, healing was the last thing I expected from Evangelism. Dr. Michael Hawn expanded my understanding of centering silence and of world Christian community when he led a group of us to the monastic Taizé community in France, one of the Global Theological Education offerings at Perkins. The most transformative course, however, was the year-long march through Interpretation of the Christian Message (commonly referred to as Systematics). After a year of wrestling with God at the Jabbok, I emerged slightly wounded but more comfortable in my own skin. I also felt a new challenge to continue the wrestling match – to seek God not just in the classroom, but in every aspect of my life. My heart and mind are changed now. I actually do think theologically, almost as instinctively as I breathe.

Perkins has provided me a wealth of opportunities outside the classroom as well. I have worked as a research assistant for a professor, assisted the Bishop-in-Residence, Bishop William B. Oden, and worked in the Center for Methodist Studies in Bridwell Library. I have been the Editor of the Perkins Student Journal and the Chair of the International Hospitality Committee, positions which also led to my service in the Perkins Student Association. I have been a liturgist in worship in the Perkins Chapel. Yet, even as Perkins has given me ways to serve outside the classroom, it has also been ready when I have chosen Sabbath over service. As the mother of a small child, I found the community more than prepared to make allowances for me when my son was sick. Perkins has helped me to better discern what I am called to in ministry, as well as what is meant to be someone else's ministry. When I said "no" to a service opportunity, the community was prepared to accept it.

Coming to Perkins was like coming home. Now I am easing out into new waters as I begin my internship this fall. I feel I am ready for this step. Perkins has made me a better person – one who has learned to take better care of herself and, consequently, to take better care of others. I thank Perkins for the firm foundation on which I now stand.