

Biographical Statement – W. Robert Martin, III

“I may not have gone where I intended to go, but I think I have ended up where I needed to be.”

— Douglas Adams, *The Long Dark Tea-Time of the Soul*

I am a P. K. (a preacher’s kid). Born on the campus of Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia while my father was serving the institution as Dean of Students, our dining table conversations often centered around matters of ministry—the highlights and low-lights of service to the church in Christ’s name. In that safe setting I was given a rare gift, one that has had a profound impact on the rest of my life. My parents allowed me, even encouraged me, to stay at table for conversations with students—deep dialog that touched on doubt, and fear and the theology (God-talk) of the day. The grace inherent in these conversations taught me that no topic or tenet of faith was closed for discussion, that there was more room for the Spirit in my doubts than in my firm, restrictive absolutes, and, most importantly, that God could use the most unlikely of people in the most unlikely of places to serve in meaningful ways in Christ’s name.

But I had other intentions. After moving to Princeton, New Jersey in the late 1960s for my father’s new position as Director of the Fund for Theological Education, I threw myself into my personal passions—theatre and creative writing. The stage would be my home, the pen my voice. I still dabbled in matters of faith, serving as a Youth Elder at Nassau Presbyterian Church and as an active participant in their youth programming, but I knew that the Spirit had no intention of leading me into ministry. No way—no how!

After a brief stint at Davidson College, I moved to Manhattan and worked in numerous venues—stage, television and print work. In 1978 I was hired as a rep-actor for the English Theatre in Vienna, Austria—a gig that took me far from home and even farther from my faith. After this two-year stint, my contract was up and I desperately wanted to go back to school to finish my BA. This intention led me to Southern California where I went to school during the day and worked as a bellman for an upscale resort at night. It was also during this time that I met my partner and spouse, Do Rogers (now Martin), who brought faith and hope and grace back into my life. We were married in 1983 and, soon after, moved to Laurinburg, North Carolina to accept positions as Resident Directors for a coed dormitory on campus. My father had come to St. Andrews Presbyterian College to serve as Chaplain after being battered and bruised in his position at the Fund—and it was his encouragement and support that guided Do and I to our roles on campus—a role that allowed me to finish my BA free of expense and gave us, as a young couple just starting out, a roof over our heads!

I flourished at St. Andrews—educationally, relationally and spiritually. After graduation I accepted the position of Director of Alumni and Church Relations for the college. I became an active member of Laurinburg Presbyterian Church, birthed two children with Do’s help, and convinced myself that a career in Higher Education was my new intention!

But the Spirit, that Spirit that had been a guest at my family dinner table so long ago, had other plans for me! Do, my pastor at LPC, and numerous colleagues at the college began to encourage me to think about seminary. Kicking and screaming, I applied for a Trial Year Fellowship with

the Fund for Theological Education, preached my first sermon at LPC, became an Inquirer for Ministry in Coastal Carolina Presbytery, and packed up my kids and spouse to attend San Francisco Theological Seminary in Marin.

Seminary was like drinking from a fire hose of faith! I quickly realized that here was a way for me to use my entire being—as faulted and as foibled as it was, in the service of something greater than my self. Here was a connection between my mind and my heart that led me towards true community, not away from it. Here was a way for me to love my God spiritually, and to love my neighbors in the service of their deepest needs and darkest disappointments. Here was a way for me to be a vessel of God’s grace by showing, for all the world to see, the vibrant grace that God had so lavishly extended to me.

And so I have served in a gamut of ways over the years:

- As a chaplain in the Tenderloin of San Francisco ministering to folks dying of AIDS
- As the staff person for Capitol Hill United Ministries in Denver, Colorado, a coalition of 13 inner-city churches united in common mission to the city
- As Pastor of Covenant Presbyterian Church in New Orleans, Louisiana and as founder of the Sophie Wright Renovation Project
- As Chaplain for Warren Wilson Presbyterian College in Swannanoa, North Carolina and as Pastor of the Congregation-in-Residence at the Warren Wilson Chapel
- As an outspoken advocate for the least and last in poor, racially divided communities
- As a liturgical writer for PCUSA General Assemblies and for various national conferences around the country
- And as Pastor / Head of Staff for the First Presbyterian Church of Palo Alto, California, a community that has been a training ground for young seminarians eager to learn the practicalities and practices of ministry.

Now, after 30 years, I am —amazingly—being called back to the very community that sent me on this journey so long ago—Laurinburg Presbyterian Church—and I am eager to share my talents, skills, and faith with folks who shared their own so freely with me!

I may not have gone where I intended to go, but I think, by the Spirit’s persistent prompting, I have ended up where I needed to be—in the service of a glorious, guiding God who has never let me go!

Thanks be to God for this new Call to Laurinburg Presbyterian Church, and thanks be to the Spirit for leading me home!