

INTRODUCING REV. DR. DEWAYNE DAVIS

The Search Committee* introduces DeWayne to offer a broad perspective of DeWayne and his ministry. After interviewing applicants from across the country and a period of deep discernment, the unanimous decision was to move forward with presenting DeWayne as our candidate for Lead Minister to the Deacons and we are excited to have you meet him.

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LEADERSHIP AND ADMINISTRATIVE EXPERIENCE

DeWayne brings 20+ years of work in religious and political organizations, public policy analyses, and federal government agencies and a wealth of leadership and administrative skills including a certificate in church management and business ethics.

At All God’s Children, where he currently serves, DeWayne has guided a major strategic planning process; overhauled church operations, including technology modernization, facility and security upgrades, an architectural assessment to improve church accessibility; and spearheaded an aggressive community engagement campaign that has resulted in the recruitment of 10 new organizational partnerships.

In his professional career prior to responding to God’s call to ministry, DeWayne has managed large staffs and large budgets. For example, while serving as Senior Legislative Assistant in the Office of Democratic Whip Steny Hoyer, DeWayne managed the appropriation legislation of the Department of Transportation, State, Treasury, Commerce, Justice, Veterans Affairs, and Housing and Urban Development.

DeWayne’s style of leadership is collaborative, in his words, “One area of strength in my practice of ministry is modeling and facilitating servant leadership. I advocate for leadership, which is shared, mutual, and visionary, with a respect for division of labor, an

expectation of innovation and experimentation, and a commitment to cooperative management and decision-making as a cohesive team. I am a firm believer in providing guidance to staff and the Board and inviting full input, participation, and engagement from all leaders within the congregational context. I have proposed and organized in every context of ministry in my career holding leadership conferences and workshops for staff and volunteers as a way of both checking in on current leadership practices and developing new leaders and new competencies. I also believe in delegating as a means of taking advantage of the particular gifts, expertise, and creativity that the staff brings to the table. I do not micromanage, and I do not believe in commanding action or coercing performance. My goal is always to set the conditions for building trust and inspiring enthusiasm for service and ministry. More important, in leading any team or organization, I always attempt to respond to the context and conditions of the setting in a fair, effective, and flexible manner that respects the members and the organization and inspires their best efforts in leading and working within the congregation."

HIS PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL FORMATION

DeWayne left the church at the age of 14 and responded to God's call to ministry after years of working in politics and political advocacy and organizing.

"I left the church, but God did not leave me. Leaving Church forced me to unlearn and relearn what faith is and can be. God's companionship remained with me despite my fear that my sexuality made me unworthy of God's grace and love....I wandered the wilderness for many years pursuing power and achievement, which resulted in a successful and promising career. But God's call on my life would not be silenced."

"I have grown so much in my understanding of my faith and about how I would like to do ministry. I have replaced the Pentecostalism and a conservative individual piety of my childhood faith with a far more generative, affirming, justice-oriented faith that is positive, progressive and practical...God's grace is available to all regardless of who we are or what we have done; we continue to be loved and pursued by God to be used for divine purposes.

PASSION FOR PREACHING

DeWayne is passionate about preaching. "Preaching matters. I worry about preaching losing its power and authority in an age when truth and expertise are contested and mistrusted in destructive ways...As a learner and follower of Jesus Christ who takes on the preaching task, I see myself serving as a reminder, encourager, exhorter, and instructor to others about the work of God in Jesus Christ and how faithful discipleship serves that work."

DeWayne writes that he "discovered preachers whose work helped me see how prophetic and powerful preaching transforms people and circumstances. My models

for preaching include Walter Brueggemann, Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Wright, Bishop Yvette Flunder, Renita Weems, Rev. Dr. James Forbes, and Thomas Long...I always come away feeling as if they have spoken to my questions, to my search for meaning and liberation, and to my desire to connect my faith journey to the concerns of the biblical witness. I find particular inspiration in the work of preachers such as the late Revs. Dr. Martin Luther King, Gardner C. Taylor, and William Sloan Coffin who used the preaching moment to invite the listeners to imagine a prophetic challenge to the systems and structures of empire, inspiring direct action to challenge war, segregation, and economic injustice."

DeWayne has a reputation as an accomplished preacher and in 2012 received the Maryland Bible Institute's Excellence in Biblical Preaching and in 2020 was selected to give the graduation address at Luther Seminary when he received his D. Min Biblical Preaching.

PASSION FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

DeWayne is also passionate about doing good justice ministry and he writes that his parents, who lived in the poorest county in Mississippi and addressed issues of poverty and minority status, inspired him. Prior to taking a call to ministry, DeWayne's portfolio in Congress included Health and Human Services, poverty, and civil rights. And as Domestic Policy Analyst for the Episcopal Church USA, he organized opportunities for members to volunteer in national social advocacy campaigns.

DeWayne's "experience politically, socially and within the context of a religious community proved invaluable in founding what would become the Global Justice Institute" when he was with MCC and he has "enabled the Institute to connect with faith-based activists around the globe," writes one of his references.

Another reference also highlights his justice work. "What really distinguishes DeWayne as a candidate is not just his calm, loving pastoral style, but equally important—especially given Plymouth's commitment to the community—is his passion and active advocacy for social justice...DeWayne is widely recognized in the Twin Cities as a tireless advocate, spokesperson, witness, convener, and mover in support of all aspects of social justice." He has worked tirelessly supporting Black Lives Matter, AIDS housing, combating hunger, LGBTQ, addiction recovery. Another says, "He has a pastoral heart and has never missed an opportunity to both call the Church and the wider community to accountability around issues such as racism, misogyny and classism; and inspires change."

As a pastor, DeWayne sees his role as "facilitating moral imagination and keeping racial justice as the enduring wisdom of God lived out in community."

ON COVENANT

"My understanding of covenant begins with the biblical demonstration of God's character as fundamentally a God who makes a promise and commitment to be in relationship with the creation, to be our God. The biblical witness testifies from Genesis to Revelation about God's determination to be in relationship with the creation and to remain faithful to God's promises and commitments to us even when we are unable or unwilling to be faithful in return. God's character is revealed in how God honors God's covenant: God binds God's self to humanity, blessing us with the vocation of stewardship; enlisting us as co-creators with God of a just, abundant world; and acting in the best interest of a creation that finds it difficult to act faithfully. In God's faithfulness, God models for us covenant loyalty. We are called to honor that covenant by loving and serving God and loving and serving our neighbors. In addition, since God has been so clear and faithful about God's commitments, I believe we must think critically and seriously about how we bind ourselves to one another in ways that reflect God's covenant loyalty. This posture has to be concrete and intentional, whereby we reclaim our vocation as stewards over the earth and the abundance with which God has blessed us. We've lost this language of covenant in our relationships with each other and in how we steward the abundance we enjoy. Perhaps the Church must take the lead in recapturing the language, image, and intentions of covenant in our ministries and discipleship as a way to generate and sustain a commitment among the faithful to new demonstrations of solidarity, relationship, and interrelatedness with all God's children."

ART, MUSIC AND POETRY AS SOLACE FOR THE SOUL

I learned very soon after I came out to myself as a gay man that the Pentecostal tradition in which I had been born and raised created no space to embrace and affirm LGBTQ people. Even before that realization, I had experienced my own church as well as other religious traditions to be rather cruel, exclusive, and unforgiving. So, when I left home to attend college in Washington, D.C., I took my new found independence as an opportunity to escape the narrow, forbidding gaze of religion. At that time of leaving and shedding the faith of my parents, I regularly mined the poetry of rock lyrics found in the works of Pink Floyd and Kate Bush, who were not satisfied with catchy jingoistic formulations but seriously engaged with big, consequential issues like love, loss, and justice. My friends and professors at Howard University were introducing me to the works of Toni Morrison, Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Leo Tolstoy, and Walt Whitman. I was introduced to the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, the Dance Theater of Harlem, and the Heritage Signature Chorale. The Kennedy Center of the Performing Arts and the Arena Stage became like sanctuaries and their shows like revivals to me, creating opportunities to commune and worship in a broader, more imaginative way with others and demonstrating that the Divine can be just as easily perceived in the melodies and dance moves of artists in a theater as in the sanctuary of a church.

All of these cultural artifacts and expressions helped me to make meaning and nurture a spiritual connection I could never have imagined in the church of my youth, which often forbid consuming what was deemed secular and profane. I was exposed to the enduring wisdom found in the struggles for freedom from bondage and for strength to overcome loss narrated in novels, in the confrontation of a protagonist against unimaginable challenges dramatized in plays and movies, and in the complicated structure of a verse of poetry exploring some of the deepest questions of the human condition. During this critical moment of exploration and at a time of great vulnerability, the witness to love and loss I found in art, dance, and music was far more accessible and urgent to me than some of the simplistic, morality tales of the Bible that church used to condition me to become a devotee.

The lasting impact of my period of self-imposed exile from formal religion has been an appreciation of the enduring wisdom of the writers, dancers, singers, and composers found in their poems, novels, ballets, and symphonies in conversation with the Bible and religious tradition. The prose of Morrison and Baldwin and the poetry of Hughes and Whitman have figured prominently in my sermons and speeches to provide poetic and rhetorical color and support for proclamation. Historic religious art has been projected regularly in the background during my sermons that wrestle with both the limitations and possibilities of unconventional approaches to the biblical witness. Now, it is not possible for me to read the Bible or explore theological themes without reference to literary, poetic, and musical touchstones that address the perennial questions of the human condition that people all too often assume are the sole province of religion.

DIVERSE RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND

I sardonically refer to myself as a “religious mongrel” because when I left the Pentecostal tradition of my youth, I really became open to seeing, hearing, and exploring the wideness of the religious expression as well as the opportunities for finding answers and meaning elsewhere. While I originally was not interested in taking a personal faith journey, I learned so much from friends and colleagues and the ways and traditions that defined their journeys. In my capacity as a congressional staffer whose portfolio included religious freedom and civil rights, I spent a lot of time in conversation and consultation with every denomination and religious collectivity, from the most conservative to the most progressive, not only about what mattered to people of faith, but also about what they had to say about politics, social issues, and philosophy. When I decided that a community of faith would provide much-needed balance to my professional life, I made a list of churches I wanted to visit and explore, which both affirmed my sexuality and relationship and pursued social justice as a defining feature of its witness in the world. MCC Washington DC was at the top of the list. After my first visit, it spoke to me, my passions, and my search for meaning. I stayed.

Metropolitan Community Churches was founded on October 6, 1968 in Los Angeles, CA, by Rev. Troy Perry, a Pentecostal pastor and preacher defrocked after his church found out that he was gay, when he gathered a group of people for a worship service in his living room. The twelve people who attended that first service came out of the Catholic, Episcopal, and Baptist traditions, which necessitated the creation of a diverse liturgy for them. When word got out that there was a church founded specifically for LGBT people to worship, the church grew quickly, and within the next five years, MCC affiliate churches opened in San Francisco, New York, Chicago, New Orleans, and Washington, DC. Today, an MCC church is found in every major U.S. city, and the fastest growing region for MCC is Latin America. The largest MCC is Metropolitan Community Church of Toronto in Toronto, Canada. MCC provides a safe space and opportunities for ministry from people from every religious tradition who have been rejected or unwelcomed in the churches and traditions in which they were born or raised.

MCC introduced me to the idea of the existence of “theologies” rather than a dogmatic, creedal, exclusive objective “theology” that resists questions and insists upon a normative, conventional understanding of God, faith, and church. I learned that there are connections between various beliefs, traditions, and religious wisdom that are worth exploring and nurturing as a means for mutual respect for the worth and dignity of all creation and combatting fear and suspicion of other faiths. That when people from different religious experiences and traditions gather in beloved community, diverse and divergent truths can be gleaned within tension, ambiguity, and liminal spaces if we are willing to listen to and respect the experiences and reflections of others.

All of this made me comfortable and even excited to go to a Methodist seminary, work for the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, and work in the ecumenical advocacy community in DC all while attending and pursuing ordination in Metropolitan Community Churches. When I began my ministry here in Minnesota, the largest circle of clergy colleagues with whom I worked on poverty, racial justice, and the Poor People’s Campaign held from the United Church of Christ. I also started working with Dr. Barbara Holmes, then-President of United Theological Seminary, with whom I worked on her black church initiative and who helped me launch AGC’s MLK Day Lecture series, in which she served as the inaugural speaker. I also served on the advisory board of the Center for Public Ministry at United, which evolved into the Kaleo Center, on whose board I served until it dissolved last spring.

When I was thinking about continuing education, I wanted to work in my field of preaching and sacred rhetoric. While United certainly reflects my theological approach and sensibilities, it did not have a doctoral level program dedicated to advanced study and research of preaching and rhetoric. Not only did Luther Seminary have such a concentration for doctoral study, Luther is also the creator and repository of the Festival of Homiletics, which I have attended annually since my earlier seminary education. Luther was a more natural fit for my passion and focus of study. And yet, my professional relationship with United and many of its professors, including Justin Tanis, Karen Hutt, and Steve Newcom, remains vibrant and collaborative.

All of these experiences have prepared me for service with Plymouth, equipping me with skill and experience in leadership, ecumenism, and collaboration that make Plymouth a prolific religious institution in Minnesota. I have learned how to be a partner with a range of people from diverse religious backgrounds and experiences in the exploration of their questions, in their quest to make meaning, in their confrontation with their hopes and fears, and in the possibility of bridging theological differences in hopes of building beloved community. These experiences have also given me an appreciation of the theological and liturgical traditions that gave rise to the contemporary witness of Plymouth and how that history and tradition can both inspire and constrain Plymouth as it seeks and serves God within, among, and beyond.

PERSONAL STATEMENT

In the systems and processes we use for matters of calling and appointing leaders of organizations, those charged with making those decisions often are not aware of all the unseen people whose dreams and strivings are represented in the candidates seeking the position. I stand before you today carrying the dreams and struggle of those others . . . the black man and woman who started their married life as sharecroppers in Jim Crow Mississippi and fought for the right of their children to receive the benefits of full citizenship they did not enjoy for so long...the 15-year-old detainee in a Northern Virginia detention center who had no idea where he would go when he was released because his parents had rejected him because of his sexuality...the young men in the Mississippi Delta who refuse to get tested because they fear losing access to housing or health care if their families find out who they are . . . the many young people I meet monthly in residential treatment centers looking for some measure of dignity and stability even as they stare down the stigma of addiction . . . the black men who have rarely known the service and protection of law enforcement who sees them as fully human . . . the many LGBTQ people craving understanding, acceptance, community, and dignity.

When I think all the people who struggle to find some measure of peace or place in this world where they are fully known and affirmed, I am reminded of a character in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, Baby Suggs Holy, who would give sermons out in the clearing of the wilderness. She told the people gathered there, "Here . . . in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it."

This was a call to people, who had been led to believe that their bodies were fit for nothing more than backbreaking toil and punishment with the chain and the lash, to affirm themselves and their bodies as worthy of love, dignity, and respect. I believe part of my work involves reminding some of the most vulnerable people in our communities of a fundamental truth that too many find hard to believe...your flesh is beautiful, and your life is worth protecting. You are worthy of love, dignity, and respect. I believe that a

life of fellowship with Jesus Christ and with the learners and followers of Jesus makes that love, dignity, and respect possible for people of every walk of life. I believe I was called to be a part of a ministry and community that is committed to bearing witness to an alternative ordering of the world in which all God's children are known, loved, and affirmed.

***Search Committee:** Chris Bohnhoff (chair), Lani Bennett, Peg Birk, Peter Eichten, Deborah Fowler, Kelly Hugunin, Jasper Jonson, Rob Reinhart, Jr.

