

Member Spotlight: Tip Tomberlin

How did you come to faith?

My earliest happy faith memories are of attending a kindergarten at a Presbyterian church in Jacksonville. When I started first grade, my Presbyterian cousins gave me a leather-bound Bible (King James Version, of course) that introduced me to the poetic language of The Word. An avid reader, I devoured a large illustrated volume of Biblical stories for children. A wily serpent, forbidden fruit in a garden paradise, a global flood, a giant sea creature, fire and sacrifices and redemption. Thought-provoking subjects for a curious child! A Southern Baptist regimen of Sunday School, worship, and Vacation Bible School did little to interest me in religion. Later, however, I discovered a new way of understanding faith. A robust Young Life program in Grades 10-12 inspired me to express my beliefs through community service. I worshipped for a year at a Unitarian Universalist Church with an outspoken pastor whose anti-war views and protests against racial and social injustice were controversial. My college years in Nashville offered opportunities to plan programs in the non-denominational campus ministry at the divinity school. I studied the religions of other cultures in my liberal arts courses. While teaching high school and then practicing law, I discovered a series of engaging pastors and a vibrant, informed congregation at Jacksonville's Riverside Presbyterian Church.

How long have you been at First Pres, and what brought you here?

I transferred membership to First Pres in 2007 but started attending here several years earlier. In the early 2000's, Brant Copeland spoke at a World HIV/AIDS Day observance at St. Paul's U.M.C. at Lake Ella. I knew too many people who were struggling with the health crisis and stigma of HIV/AIDS or who had died. Given the mainstream Protestant churches' resistance to gay ordination and marriage, and their ambivalence about the LGBTQ community's role in church life, I found Brant's affirming message reassuring. I wanted to worship with a congregation who would support such a welcoming view. I'm sure some Congregational Care Committee members warmly greeted me during my initial visits, and that sealed the deal.

What parts of your journey in faith have been formative?

I grew up in a hodge-podge of religious influences. Mom worshipped at a fairly progressive Southern Baptist church in Jacksonville. Dad's side of the family were Methodists; his father was a lay pastor. However, my father's service in the Marines in the South Pacific led him to question where God was amid the atrocities of World War Two. My mother tried to explain to my younger sister and me why Dad stayed home on Sunday mornings. My maternal grandfather and an aunt took me to Catholic mass (I was studying Latin). Mom worked for a corporate foundation established by a Jewish family who regularly included the Tomberlins in observing Hanukkah and other holidays. I remember the powerful narratives of schoolmates' grandparents or parents who had survived the Holocaust and had lost loved ones.

Oddly, I witnessed the power of religion (for better or worse) sitting with my grandmother watching Oral Roberts's weekly televised evangelical services. Another formative experience involved conversations with a dear friend who drew a low number in the Selective Service lottery and expected to be drafted to Vietnam soon. A sincere pacifist who understood the risks of his position, he sought my advice in drafting a personal essay to present to the draft board. When my friend was granted conscientious objector status, I learned the importance of standing up for one's values. Given my FSU professor-husband's travels to religion conferences, I've enjoyed visiting open, affirming Presbyterian, Episcopalian, and Lutheran congregations in cities including San Diego, Berlin, Chicago, Boston, Denver, and Toronto. Amid the toxic culture wars and anti-woke legislation in Florida, I'm comforted knowing that First Pres and many other congregations understand that "wokeness" is the acknowledgment that we must fight unjust discrimination and strive to make our world a better place for everyone.

What parts of life at First Pres bring you joy?

I've always been drawn to any given church, first, because of the minister rather than the particular Protestant denomination. A good sermon brings joy, irrespective of the name of the church. First Pres has a legacy of providing excellent sermons, educating us in Christian values and the importance of community outreach, and celebrating faith through music and song. Our congregation knows so much more about the Bible than I ever will: a case in point, the wide-ranging commentary during Pastor Margaret's semester-long Zoom class on the Old Testament. Worship, Inquirers' Class, book discussions, serving on the Session, team meetings, and mission work challenge me to understand better what it is to be Presbyterian and Christian. First Pres practices faith in action in ministering to the congregation and to the wider community.

What do you see as needed for the future of this congregation?

Although I was a Pastor Nominating Committee member, I didn't foresee the profound effects of First Pres' transition from the familiar and comfortable to the new and unknown. The isolating effects of the pandemic dealt a second challenge to our church family's sense of stability and identity. Before seeking a permanent minister, our congregation must learn from what we could, and should, have done differently to have ensured a workable transition from Brant to Margaret. The challenge for the Session and the congregation has been reaching consensus about why a talented young pastor felt compelled to leave First Pres. We must ask who we are. What do we want and expect from the next minister and Session and team leaders? How do we navigate a meaningful path when our devoted congregants are aging and nationwide PCUSA attendance is falling? Our congregation must discern what aspects of the familiar worship are essential, and what we should change to account for our evolving culture and new, younger congregants.

How do you see yourself participating in that work for the future of this congregation?

Although I'm soon rotating off the so-called Transition Session, I'll continue participating in discussions relating to the well-being of church and preschool personnel. I support how the Care & Outreach Team functions as a social ministry in planning fellowship events, reaching out to those who are grieving or celebrating, welcoming church visitors, and communicating with members who cannot attend worship. I want time to screen books for our occasional book-club discussions. I support inter-denominational efforts to address community problems and (working with governmental leaders) to seek solutions.

Where have you seen a Triune God recently?

That's an easy answer. In representing the Session on the Preschool Board, I get to see the children participating in the classrooms and joyously engaging with one another on the playground. The preschool is an integral part of our church's modern history, a symbol of our commitment to support diversity and to nurture and prepare young children to be informed, productive citizens. The sounds of children in the Sunday School and in worship instill hope that our historic church will be a guiding force in their lives as it has been for us adults. Finally, I feel the power of the Spirit in the organ music of Bach and Mendelssohn and in the joyous hymn-singing every Sunday morning.