

Below are reflections by Rev. Sharon Seyfarth Garner on Rev. Jennifer Steinfurth Brown's transfer of her clergy credentials from the United Methodist Church. On the reverse side of this page are the words Rev. Jennifer Steinfurth Brown spoke on the floor of the clergy session.

## **Holy Ground at Annual Conference**

Rev. Sharon Seyfarth Garner  
Lakeside, Ohio; June, 2011

Here are a few words that you won't often hear in relation to clergy session at Annual Conference – "We were standing on Holy Ground." However, this year at the East Ohio Annual Conference Clergy Executive Session, there we stood. We experienced the power of a prophetic moment as we honored the decision of one of our beloved colleagues to leave the United Methodist Church and transfer her ordination credentials to a denomination that would honor both who God called her to be and who God created her to be.

We were progressing through the usual, long list of votes when we came to the transfer of credentials to another denomination. Our "yes" vote opened the door for Rev. Jennifer Steinfurth Brown to say farewell to the United Methodist Church and to begin a meaningful, new chapter of ministry. When Jennifer stood to request a moment of personal privilege, the Holy Spirit rushed in like a mighty wind and filled the auditorium. Dozens of colleagues rose and stood silently to show our support for Jennifer and to honor the years of dynamic ministry that she had shared with us. As Jennifer began to speak, the Bishop stopped her. She was "out of order" by attending the clergy session since she had technically transferred her membership several months ago, and we had just affirmed this by a formal vote moments before. He was doing what those in charge are expected to do – uphold the rules. However, this moment of holy conferencing was bigger than the "rules." I believe that our Bishop recognized this when he went on to say that Jennifer would be allowed to speak if someone from within the conference would invite her to do so. A clergy colleague made the necessary motion, and the subsequent show of hands became yet another sign of our collective affirmation.

With great courage and grace, Rev. Jennifer Steinfurth Brown began to speak again. The Pentecostal presence of the Holy Spirit swirled in our midst. She shared words of love for the United Methodist church that had nurtured her since her birth. She shared that she had been called to ministry even before she understood her own sexual identity. She shared her struggle in the discernment process that led her to the faith-filled decision to leave her beloved United Methodist Church and join a communion that could embrace both her call to ministry and her sexuality. She was bravely telling the truth of her own story. As she spoke, additional colleagues who were moved by her words rose silently to show their support. We stood together - humbled, amazed, tear-streaked and proud of the brave witness by our friend and colleague. We were standing on Holy Ground.

As is often the case with transformative moments, there is both a sense of joy for new beginnings and sorrow for what will no longer be. I am filled with profound joy that Jennifer has found a place where she can openly be the minister that God has called her to be. She can share her beautiful, blended family with her congregation. She will thrive! Yet, I am also filled with profound sorrow that our United Methodist Church was unable to embrace her on this journey. It is truly our loss. I began my own journey into ministry in the same Probationary Cluster as Jennifer over 15 years ago. I consider her to be one of my closest colleagues and dearest friends. Not only do I miss her now, but I miss the shared ministry that we would have celebrated together as lifelong United Methodist clergy. My heart is aching.

I pray for the day when the Spirit of Pentecost will permeate our church – when each one of us will be empowered to speak the truth of our own story and all will be understood. Only then will our beloved "cross and flame" truly represent the tongues of fire that proclaim God's love to all people.

## **My name is Jennifer Brown Steinfurth.**

I was born and raised in The United Methodist Church. Some of you have known me for almost my whole life.

What you may not know is how deeply I love this church and what a struggle it has been to learn to love myself as much.

Before I could walk, I was walked down the aisle at Church of the Saviour as a newly baptized member of Christ's holy church.

My mom tells me that before I had spoken a full sentence, that I had memorized parts of my favorite UM hymns and would sing them with all my heart.

Before I ever fell in love, I fell into the love and grace of God.

Before anyone ever asked me out, I was asked to help serve communion at Reach Out camp here at Lakeside.

Before I had my first kiss, I had preached my first sermon.

Before I was even aware of my own sexuality I was sure of my calling to the ordained ministry in The United Methodist Church.

It seems as if for as long as I can remember I dreamed about the day that I would stand here in Hoover auditorium as part of this very clergy session.

What I never dreamed was that I would one day end up leaving.

Before going on Family Leave I met with some of my colleagues for an interview at the conference center. In that interview, I admitted that though I still felt strongly called to serve the sacraments, that I was having a hard time taking communion for myself.

I was told that this was a serious theological problem. And it was. You see I had made the theological mistake of believing that The United Methodist stance on homosexuality was indicative of how God actually sees me, my salvation and most importantly my calling.

I was hurt that my own church found "who I am" to be incompatible with Christian teaching. I was tired of giving my whole self to the ministry but feeling afraid to let God's love and grace hold every part of me.

Now I take part in the Eucharist every Sunday and sometimes more than once if possible. The difference is that in the Episcopal Church I am allowed to bring my whole self to the altar with the people I love and the God I love. I can bring my commitment to serve but also my need to be loved and forgiven. I can bring my sexual identity and my identity as someone called by God to the ordained ministry of Christ's holy church.

For that reason, it is not without great sadness and hurt but also joy and relief that I have joined St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Cleveland Heights and have begun the ordination process in the Diocese of Ohio.

Lakeside, Ohio; June, 2011