

Reflections of ministry in Florida

The Rev. Dr. T. Glenn Bosley-Mitchell aka Thomas Glenn Mitchell II

A child of circuit-riding parents and three generations, both paternal and maternal lineage, of Ordained Ministry in Florida Methodism (back to 1876), and four generations at Florida Southern College, T. Glenn has lived throughout Florida and served 42 years as an ordained minister in the Florida Annual Conference. Glenn is half of a clergy couple (UCC/UMC), Dad to seven Millennials, a grad of two Methodist-related universities (American and Emory), as well as a graduate of the Florida State University College of Law. Glenn helped develop and led the Conference response to the AIDS crisis in the 80's. He is a former member of the Florida Bar, lived through Hurricane Andrew, and served as a national officer for the Methodist Federation for Social Action. On medical leave, as a West Nile Encephalitis survivor, Glenn lives in Colorado with his spouse, Gaye, who is ordained in the United Church of Christ.

Growing up in the Fifties and Sixties in Florida, as a Preacher's Kid and with both parents also being Preacher's Kids, doing church was doing the family business. During my high school years, my father was the unofficial pastor of my high school sports teams and it seemed like every kid, with their families, came to my dad's church for Christmas Eve. Doing church in the 60's and early 70's was small town life in "pre-Disney" Central Florida.

My high school and college years (at American University) as most Boomers' experienced, was heightened by the racial injustices and anti-Vietnam War protests of our coming of age times. The assassinations of Bobby and Martin etched themselves into our consciousness. Protests in Miami Beach in 1972 (Remember the movie, *Born on the Fourth of July?*) preceded the Watergate-driven downfall of Nixon. I yearned to be one of those in politics with higher ideals, carving a new path through the jungles of political fraud. I wanted to be in the Legislature or Congress or be Governor; the last thing I ever thought I would be was a minister.

The Jimmy Carter years brought a fresh new way of being a politician and the social causes of our time excited my calling for social justice. I discovered a dual Juris Doctorate/Master of Divinity program in Denver and eagerly started the difficult road of being both an "Attorney at Law" and a "Man of the Cloth." My calling was for me to embrace the role the church plays in the social justice our times demanded—law and ministry would be the key. After I began my educational journey in Seminary in Denver, a good friend of mine soon called me and announced he was running for the Florida Senate—his potential victory might just be the vote to get the Equal Rights Amendment passed in Florida, which had just failed the year before by a 19-21 vote. I packed my bags and returned to Florida to once again hit the campaign trails. Alas, we lost in Polk County, and the ERA failed, and I found myself in law school at FSU in Tallahassee and then later in Seminary in Atlanta. Finally, both degrees! But our world and our culture was rapidly changing.

Soon, the presidential years of a B-movie actor turned Boomers into the “Me Generation” and away from social justice, or at least any opportunity to make any kind of living doing good in the world. I was told that if I wanted to ever be able to continue being a United Methodist Minister, I had to serve at least one year as an actual pastor in a real church—social justice wasn’t good enough—I had to be in the mainstream. Soon, marriage and babies and “doing church” again became my culture.

Yes, I was a Methodist pastor, but I never wanted to be ordinary—I had to follow the calling of the prophet Micah—just within a church culture. I eagerly sought the ways to do so—having spent some time in Seminary in the 1980’s working with some of the very first AIDS patients at Grady Hospital in Atlanta, I came to Florida as a brand-new minister pushing the Florida Conference into undertaking a brand-new ministry as an advocate for those among us living with AIDS. I spearheaded church efforts to begin advocating for criminal justice rehabilitation and not just more and more incarceration. Along with my parents and my brother, also a Methodist pastor, we mainstreamed human sexuality conversations and discussions at church camps, long before its time. We sponsored resolutions, organized workshops and witness activities; we longed to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

With other colleagues, I organized a group of young clergy and lay folks to oppose the Bishop and the whole Annual Conference against the efforts all over the southern church to declare that quote: “the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching.” Believe me, the Bishop and other church leaders took notice and we were soon all “on the list” of troublemakers. Maybe we needed some of that walk humbly language from Micah—but I suspect that the prophet had other designs of what walking humbly really meant.

Throughout my years in ministry, I never seemed to be placed in a position of just doing ordinary ministry. While my appointment as a pastor with a young family to a church of young families in South Dade in 1992, certainly seemed within the normal flows that a pastor might expect, Hurricane Andrew blew away any conceptions of normal church life and with it over half the congregation, as I was soon called upon to finish demolishing what remained and build a brand-new church, all while living in a mobile home in the church’s back yard and growing three children under the age of six.

My church building experience took me forward to be the managing Pastor of a 3000-member church in Gainesville, which, in the height of the era of mega-churches, was relocating and building a super-sanctuary with seating for a couple thousand. While, I never truly practiced law, I used lots of that knowledge in negotiating all the construction contracts, permitting issues, and zoning variances required. One story: the city wanted to keep taxing our just purchased land of 67 acres for our new church property, so I organized a new worship service on the vacant land using a flat top trailer and a catering tent underneath the tree canopy in an open field, declaring that land for God. Then the city, said we couldn’t do that—we owed property taxes, we needed a tent permit, and new zoning, and they didn’t give those for just one day a week kind of events, so loading up a crew of

folks, we invaded the city commission meeting, reminded the city officers of the First Amendment, reminded the city that there were single-event tents all around Gainesville on those football Saturdays every Fall, and we were soon in the Methodist outdoors/tent revival business as we began that \$12 million dollar building project—I discovered some great preachers during that transition time—including one you all know.

As our nation struggles with the effects of a Coronavirus, I'm reminded that I survived a different kind of virus in 2004. Health experts say that there are over 500 million mosquito-related illnesses each year (90% in Africa) with over two million deaths each year. While leading a youth mission trip to urban Atlanta from rural Quincy, I was bit by a mosquito and almost died from West Nile Virus Encephalitis. Gaye was told to gather the family around as I only had days to live and if I did live, I would never be able to be a pastor again, yet, through the miracle of medical care and the love of my family, my friends, and a generous congregation, I survived, recovered, and continued to serve God on my ministerial journey.

The next four churches I served before going to St. John's in Miami Beach were certainly churches that had thrived in the days of church culture but had lost their way. It felt like my task, as their pastor was to find creative ways to rethink their focus. I never felt that I was an ordinary minister in an ordinary congregation, and so I yearned to help them do church differently. Yet, rocking the boat causes lots of waves as one upsets the status quo—the church's Seven Last Words –“We've never done it that way before.” In Methodism, that means just keep moving on.

While some folks might think it is a failure to come to one's last few years in a career serving one's smallest church at a minimum salary, I was thrilled to be appointed to St. John's in 2012. There I found folks willing to own their own progressive theology, and who embraced the changed culture they lived within. St. John's folks understood that ministry was a partnership with community organizations, many of them not even faith-based ones. I found folks who do Social Justice through South Florida Urban Ministries, Thanksgiving meals through Branches, homeless foot-washing efforts in partnership with the downtown First Church. Their Arts efforts have through the years expressed St. John's commitments to being an avenue for social justice—to providing amplification for the voiceless in our community, a palette for visually expressing the prophetic imagery of our times.

At St. John's, while maybe they were small in numbers, they continue to be a beacon of faith, showing a dis-trusting community, that we “are not those kind of Christians”--that here are folks that fully own our faith as a community where all are welcome—and all means all.

I come to the end of 42 years of being an active, United Methodist Minister. I'm thrilled of my journey together with other Florida United Methodists, as we all continue to be on the forefront of what it means to be an extraordinary community of faith embedded in the middle of a long-ago changed culture, ahead of our time. I'm so glad that my active ministry

of “doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with our God” is culminated in this newest plot on the journey-map of United Methodist ministry in Florida.