

## Biography

Sarah Smith-Candidate for Ministry

“*For as long as I shall live, I will testify to love, I’ll be a witness in the silences, when words are not enough...*” I sang along with Wynona Judd on repeat. When I was 8 or so, my grandmother had a CD player in her kitchen with the *Touched by an Angel* soundtrack. While we lived in Florida, we made regular trips to Pikeville to visit, and this was one of those visits. Of all the lines in all the songs on that CD, that one gave me goosebumps. In hindsight, it was an apt description of my calling as a chaplain, one who bears witness to exactly those moments.

I would not have been able to describe it then. I grew up an ecumenical mutt, baptized Episcopalian, raised in and out of Catholic parochial schools, bumming rides to youth groups because while Christian, regular church attendance was not a thing in my family. They took bets early on that I would become a nun. I took offense at being offered the children’s service and did things like establish a “prayer club” at kindergarten recess, so we could move souls from purgatory. When I could drive, I chose a nondenominational church where I could easily slip in and out. By high school, most of my theological engagement was intellectual, the relationship part more transactional. I prayed to God for things I wanted, worked hard, got the things I wanted, and the formula would not be challenged until graduate school. I could, and did, spend hours in the religion section of Barnes and Noble. My early Catholic education had given me a solid foundation in tradition, reverence, mystery, and hymns. It did not, however, give me many ideas for what I might “do,” with any of it.

Theology remained my “backup plan,” so it was not until after a few states, changes in major, and a bad breakup, that I finally gave it some serious thought. I took a single course so I could maintain the illusion that I had any idea what I was doing with my life. *Classical Texts of Judaism* sounded fun. I didn’t know I’d be the only female or the only Christian. After the first exam, the rabbi thanked me for “getting it,” and it was my first affirmation that there were a lot of things about theology that I “got,” even if still undirected.

By the next semester I jumped at an opportunity to move back to Tennessee as a nanny for a family member, and in the process met my ex-husband. He encouraged me to go back to school to finish my bachelor’s degree. A move to Pikeville, where I could live in the same house as that old CD player and attend UPike seemed like the most efficient way to do that. I found mentors in my professors and can trace the building realization that I was Presbyterian. It is a

Presbyterian birthed college. The chaplain encouraged me to give my first sermon and later performed my wedding in the same First Presbyterian Church that would later host me for a summer internship and support me through ordination. One of my three religion professors was a woman, a Presbyterian minister who read from the Hebrew when she questioned a translation and struck me as magical as a unicorn. I didn't know the conglomeration could exist: college professor, female minister, wife, and mother. If she could, then just maybe I could, too.

I soon learned even with a B.S. in religion, there is not suddenly something to "do" with all of that knowledge, and I would need a higher degree. I gave God my list of requirements (somewhere in the south, Vanderbilt specifically, and a scholarship), and it happened. It became a time of intense deconstruction, both intellectually and personally. The end of the first semester was also the too-early end to my first pregnancy, and the beginning of the route to chaplaincy. When I was ready to walk back in church, it was an Ash Wednesday service at the hospital. Soon after, I found an unexpected home at Glendale Baptist, a progressive group of wonderful humans who didn't mind me being furious with God. It was like they let me hide there and loved me while we worked things out. I spent three years and entered conversations about ordination before admitting I might be Glendale, but I still wasn't Baptist.

CPE was the next step in my chaplain career, which meant a residency year. Before that year would start in August, I had the spring to fill, which is when I returned to FPC Pikeville and stood in for a few months. They were gracious, encouraging, this beautiful mix of traditional and formal while also not blinking as I led services with a toddler on my hip. It was "home," on many levels, and meant starting the lengthy process of ordination post-M.Div. The ordination process continued in parallel with my CPE training, witnessing everything from the first wave of the pandemic in ICU's to the end of my marriage. The last 4 years, especially my time in the liminal spaces of the hospital, have reinforced both things I learned early on and the things I picked up as a Presbyterian: appreciation for mystery and reverence, the comfort and reassurance of liturgy, and the most recent addition, something about providence and releasing the pressure. I'm not responsible for praying souls out of purgatory, the number of things I do not control is immeasurable, and shockingly, all of that is okay. As that quote from the Talmud says, I'm not obligated to complete the work, but neither am I free to abandon it. My vocation is to bear witness in the silences and teach others how to do the same.

## Statement of Faith

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It is difficult to state what I believe without also feeling the need to explain it, which is even harder. As C.S. Lewis said, “besides being complicated, reality, in my experience, is usually odd. It is not neat, not obvious, not what you expect.” In that vein, it makes perfect sense to say the one, monotheistic God I believe in is also triune, that God became incarnate among us in Jesus who was both fully human and fully divine and sustains us through the Holy Spirit.

I believe in God, the creator of everything, who did not stop at Genesis but continues to create. There is “God” and “not God,” and all the things “not God,” still reflect the One who created them. This comes with implications, things like responsibility to one another and to the environment we share. It means the line between sacred and profane is a blurry one. We do in fact have to love our neighbors, and even the most challenging people have something to say about God. It means when I respond to a trauma page for an incoming victim of child abuse, I still provide care for the adult on scene whether I know if they were the perpetrator or not. It means if you exist then you have worth, because whether I can see it or not, you bear the image of the divine. It means whatever my patient has done or not done, believes or does not believe, if they are on my census then they are mine to care for because they are God’s first.

I believe in Jesus, the Son of God, born to Mary, Emmanuel, God with us. The totality of Jesus’ life matters, it is the life, death, and resurrection combined that elicit the praise we give, and serve to right our relationship to God. I believe when Jesus claims to be the way, the truth, and the life, Richard Rohr is onto something when he calls it descriptive rather than prescriptive. I don’t have the ideas of substitutionary atonement all reconciled in my mind, but I do believe that through Jesus, it all works. In becoming man, “God with us,” Jesus gives me a leg to stand on when I talk with patients who insist God wasn’t supposed to give them more than they could handle. God didn’t promise that, but God does not abandon us in the middle of it. Showing up matters to God, and God proved it as intimately as possible by taking on skin and suffering.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, thanks to the Holy Spirit. The Spirit stays busy, the source of wisdom and creativity, bringing us to faith and helping us to live it out. When I say a prayer of thanks for happening to be in the right place at the right time with the right patient or uttering

just the right phrase during a bedside prayer, it is the Holy Spirit I credit. I picture Her somehow as this flour-stained apron wearing matriarch within the Godhead, meddling in our personal lives and calling everyone home for dinner.

The Spirit is also concerned with salvation and scripture, present and guiding the writing of God's words by imperfect hands. The Spirit testifies to their worth despite all the ways humans mess them up, guiding us to meet the Holy within their pages.

Sacraments are "outward signs of invisible grace," with baptism and communion being the two we observe. Baptism happens once, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in community, a sign of the new covenant and entry into Christ's church. It is the beginning of the journey. Communion, or the Lord's Supper, happens much more often, bread for the journey, the provision of grace and nourishment as we carry on. The Lord's supper is the family supper where the Spirit reminds us of what we know, that everything gained in Christ's life, death and resurrection are ours, too, in the sacrament as we partake.

I believe it is not coincidence that Godself is a relationship, and that we humans are also made to be in relationship, as inconvenient as that may be at times. We are accountable to God and one another, and it is our involvement in the life of the church helps us to do that. It provides community, accountability, means for growth and sustenance, and a means by which together, as a force greater than a single individual, we can act as the "hands and feet" of Christ in the world.