

Breaking Denominational Traditions

Becoming the church's pastor was Evelyn Puckett's first break with Colonial Avenue Methodist's traditions. But it wasn't the last.

Looking at Pastor Evelyn Puckett's résumé, one would assume the Spirit-filled 58-year-old ministers at a charismatic or Pentecostal church. After all, she attended full gospel Elim Bible Institute and the Assemblies of God Central Bible College; served as choir director at Rock Church in Virginia Beach, Va.; was a counselor at the Christian Broadcasting Network; and ministered at Women's Aglow conferences.

But when it came time for Evelyn to fulfill a longtime calling and desire to be a pastor, she ended up at Colonial Avenue Methodist Church in downtown Norfolk, Va. The church, steeped in the traditions of its denomination, voted her in as its first woman pastor.

Evelyn discovered that the Methodist denomination is very open to women. "In many ways," she says, "I think certain denominational churches are forerunners when it comes to women in ministry. They've broken through that barrier."

Yet the irony of her situation is not lost on Evelyn. "For me to be in a Methodist church is actually kind of funny. God really does have a sense of humor."

The wife and grandmother of two has grown to love the church family she has been with now for eight years. She points out that she is not a typical Methodist pastor. Her small but growing congregation is used to her hopping from the piano to the organ to the area in front of the pews. "I'm kind of all over the place. I'm not just behind the pulpit," she says.

Her church also has gotten used to the fact that their pastor is Spirit-filled. "From the beginning, I've been very open about my beliefs," she says, adding that most congregants have taken a stand-back-and-watch attitude toward speaking in tongues. "But they love me—they love the way that I am. They love the 'enthusiasm,' as they call it."

Puckett has met many other Methodist pastors who also are Spirit-filled. "There's a real prayer in their heart for their denomination," she says. "They all say the same thing—that the Lord has sent them to their church for a reason; they firmly believe there's a revival coming to the Methodist church." Evelyn sees this as God's fulfillment of the Methodist denomination's roots—in the 1800s during the days of the Brush Arbor revival meetings, hundreds of people were slain in the Spirit.

Puckett herself comes from deep Pentecostal-charismatic roots. Her parents were fervent Assemblies of God evangelists who opened their East Paterson, N.J., home to people in need, including orphans and escapees from Nazi prison camps. Her parents also worked with New York City hippies, drug addicts and dock workers.

When Evelyn was 3, a teen-ager by the name of Morris Cerullo came to live with her family after getting booted out of his Jewish orphanage for reading a New Testament. He lived with Evelyn's family for three years. Later on Evelyn worked for the evangelist as a secretary and sang at his conferences.

Evelyn spent her teen years evangelizing with her brother, Edward, in the streets of the Bowery and Bedford-Stuyvesant areas. They preached, sang gospel songs and ministered to drug addicts, gang members and others.

In college Evelyn started to sense a calling to pursue full-time ministry as a pastor. "But they [administrators] laughed at me," she says. "I was told to just stay involved in music

or do missionary work.” She spent six months serving as a missionary in South America and Kenya.

While at Elim, Evelyn was chatting one evening with some classmates. “All of a sudden I heard myself saying, ‘You know, I believe God’s going to use me in a denominational church some day.’ I later thought, What denomination would accept a woman pastor? and dismissed the idea.”

Evelyn continued working in ministry—running a home for wayward girls and working in music ministry at Virginia Beach’s Rock Church, pastored by her friends, Anne and John Gimenez.

One day, while getting her hair done and looking at a magazine, Evelyn came across an article on women in ministry. “I was looking at these photographs of women in robes, and this strong presence of God came all over me. I thought, Wow! That’s going to be me some day.” Again, Evelyn forgot about the incident.

She was soon married to her husband, Gerald, and eventually had two children. “I always stayed involved in ministry,” Evelyn says, “teaching, playing the organ, leading choirs, helping pastors get started. That’s been my life.”

While speaking at a Women’s Aglow conference in northern Virginia, God again began dealing with Evelyn. “I started thinking about those earlier incidences,” she says. “I felt a drawing to the Lord for what He had been calling me to all my life.”

At the conference, Evelyn met a Methodist pastor and his wife who told her about their denomination’s candidacy program, which was specifically designed for those over 40 looking for a second career.

After completing the two-year program Evelyn became a licensed local Methodist pastor. “It all fell into place,” she says.

When her district superintendent called with her first assignment, she and her family were delighted to learn it was right in the area, and they wouldn't have to move.

What's more, Evelyn was awestruck at the church's magnificent turn-of-the-century architecture with its grand arches, pipe organ and stained-glass windows. One night soon after the congregational vote, she and Gerald found themselves parked outside the church, staring at the stained glass windows highlighted by street lamps.

"It wasn't anything I had ever dreamed of," Evelyn says. "I knew it was God and His perfect timing."

"I look back over the years at all the people I've helped and the pastors I've worked with. I think how good God is to give me such a beautiful church. I've spent my life helping others, and the Lord has given me this."

Evelyn also views it another way. "The Methodist denomination has these beautiful old historic structures. I see them as preserved—that God has preserved them for His purpose, for this time because many of them have very few people left in them. But I believe there's an awakening that's starting in many of our Methodist churches."

At Colonial Avenue, Evelyn's initial congregation of 30 was mostly retirees, many of whom she has since buried. "I grew very close to them," she says. "I was able to pray and lead them to the Lord before they died."

Those experiences showed Evelyn how to break through the traditions of a denominational church. "The Methodist church," she says, "is filled with good people. But so many times it's just religion to them. So many times, as their pastor, it requires being able to break through that religious stuff."

"I find that just being real with people brings out the realness in them." And that, Evelyn says, "is the most

gratifying part of being a pastor. Seeing people come through some really tough things in their life. Watching and helping them overcome major issues and struggles and then finding release, finding victory and finding the Lord in their life. It's really been powerful.

"I hope I'm around here for a long time," Evelyn says. "I want to see what is now being birthed come to fruition."

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