

Tillie Terrific!

by Susan Phillips

Our Sardis pastor, teacher, and caring friend was teaching and caring for countless folk before coming to us... folks in Cleveland County; Cincinnati, Ohio; Georgetown, Kentucky; and Louisville, Kentucky. There she taught secondary English and volunteered in PTAs, churches, as well as inner city missions. Raising three sons was priority during that time. When that role was almost complete, Tillie revisited her longing for a missionary or church vocation.

Tillie began satellite seminary courses in Shelby, North Carolina from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary (SEBTS). Her last year at SEBTS was spent on campus at a time of transition from progressive leadership to ultra-conservative. The philosophy of those who had taken over was to promote "women's studies" as "helpmate training" for their husbands who would be pastors. Tillie was encouraged when she heard the seminary was celebrating "Women's Day". Upon entering the chapel, she actually heard the speaker admonish the seminary women to be helpmates to their husbands... one evidence of that role would be "never wear flannel to bed." Tillie walked out of the chapel mid-speech! No longer was there an openness for women to enter pastoral ministry and preach the gospel. But Tillie earned her Masters of Divinity (with languages) and persevered to live out her calling to pastoral ministry.

Our mutual friends in ministry, Tina Burleson and Sheila Black, opened a door for her by recommending her to Pritchard Memorial Baptist's Minister of Missions, Gerald Worrell. There she served as Associate Minister of Missions and chaplain to two mobile home parks. This position fit her vision of ministry after being inspired by a seminar on multifamily housing missions. When Gerald left, Tillie became Minister of Missions and served 5 1/2 years. I was serving as Minister with Children and Families at that time and we became friends as well as coworkers. Being women called to ministry in the changing Baptist world during those years was not easy. We helped form a local support group where those of us navigating the issues of gender in ministry felt free to share and encourage each other. Twenty-five years later, several of us still fellowship regularly. We can now celebrate successes and affirm churches like Sardis and organizations like Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF) and Alliance of Baptists who value women called to pastor and minister.



THIS IS WHAT A
PASTOR LOOKS LIKE...



...AS STRONG AS
ANY OTHER...



...ABLE TO LEAP TALL
CHALLENGES IN A
SINGLE BOUND...



...BAREFOOT AND
PASTORING!

We've Called Her Pastor

by Rev. Dr. Tim Moore

After Magay and I announced that we would be having triplets and in addition that I would be the parent who would stay at home with the kiddos, Sardis looked into the idea of retaining me as pastor on a half-time basis and to search for a half-time associate pastor. We were heading into uncharted waters. A limited search could not find another congregation doing what we were going to try to do. The decision to try the untried revealed a lot about this congregation.

We can casually look back on that decision 19 years ago because things turned out so well. That was not apparent when we made the decision, or while searching for an associate pastor.

The difference was Tillie Duncan. The unique staffing model that Sardis employed, which has helped other congregations think in new ways, was a success for one reason. We called the right person as our first half-time associate pastor. Had we selected a less capable person our untried idea might have drowned in the uncharted waters.

Tillie's love for God and the Church, and specifically for Sardis Baptist Church, was evident from the first day she walked into the doors of the meetinghouse. She had been working at Pritchard Memorial Baptist in missions programming, but had all the skills to serve a church as pastor. She just needed the right place to serve. Sardis was a perfect fit. For nearly 18 years it's been a wonderful partnership!

What has made her such a wonderful pastor is that she has always been willing to serve where she was needed. She has played with preschoolers at VBS; taught weekday Bible classes; sat and listened to the ill and dying; helped guide and direct committees; challenged Sardis children to bowling duels; worked in the heat of summer mission trip construction projects; faithfully sang in the choir; touched grieving hearts preaching at funerals and praying at gravesites; whitewater rafted with the youth; pulled pork BBQ to be sold for a fundraiser – in short she never backed away from any challenge, need, heartache, tough conversation, or moment for deep prayer. She kept working to be a better pastor, whether that was in the craft of preaching, collaborative leadership, youth ministry, or spiritual practices.

In creating a team ministry I could share anything with Tillie because I could always trust her. When Mandy came on staff she had been warned that maybe Sardis wouldn't be a good place because the person previously in that position would still be in the church at a new role. I told Mandy she had nothing to worry about – Tillie would be her best advocate. Whenever we danced around the truth, Tillie spoke her mind and cleared the air. She always gave 100% and passed along the credit to others.

Personally Tillie made it possible for me to be a half-time pastor/half-time stay at home dad, which allowed Magay and me to raise our children as we hoped. We will forever be grateful. For Sardis Tillie made it possible for this church to believe it can do ministry "outside the box" and so we should never limit ourselves because of size. A generation of young people at Sardis know that God calls women to be pastors because she pastored this church so well. A generation of older folks at Sardis know that God can call anyone, at any age to a new thing because she was ordained into ministry in her 50's and has now served for 18 years.

On the occasion of this church naming her Pastor Emerita I celebrate the blessings God has given this church and me through the ministry of The Reverend Tillie Duncan. Thanks be to God!

