

Lord A L

When he rd he o ce of he Lord s y o e ho sh send  
ere Lord send e!  
Isaiah 6:8

“



negatively about individual church members. Her parents saw the best in people, especially church folks.

Home life was enjoyable for many reasons but especially because their home was open to those who might be separated from family for the holidays or visiting preachers



and Shelton, PC, an accounting firm in Birmingham. Sarah and Lloyd have been married for twenty years, and they are the proud parents of two boys, David, 18 and Dannelly, 13. She and her family live in Mountain Brook, a suburb of Birmingham.

Someone once said, in a vocational seminar, that every call to follow the Lord has

that takes place. St. Augustine once said, “My soul is restless oh God, until it rest in you.” Anyone who has experienced that lone call from God has experienced restlessness. Sarah reflects on an experience when on a post high school graduation choir tour, she had

She thought that God was calling her to preach. She states, “I went to talk with my Professor, Dr. Findley Edge, and I told him that I thought that God was calling me to preach. He asked why this was a problem. I answered that I had never seen a woman do this. To which he immediately came nose to nose with me and said, “Wouldn’t you rather be a part of something new and exciting rather than a part of what has always been?” And everything inside of me said “yes!” This call to preach was confirmed in my last semester when I won the Francisco Preaching Award and was asked to preach in the Seminary’s chapel for worship. It was a golden time in which I received amazing encouragement.” On the journey of discernment, God will often send little signs or blessings to let us know that we are on the right track. This episode in her life was a





left the room and got in my car. I could not go far, because I lost my composure and was not able to drive. So, I drove to a part of the parking lot that was dark and obscure, turned off my car and wept. I could feel my spirit literally spiraling down into darkness, but just before I hit what I perceived to be the bottom, it was as if a hand reached out to my spirit, caught me, and held me. While those days were difficult, the presence of God was alive to comfort and keep me patient.”

After twenty years of being in the ministry, Sarah realized that she still did not have a pulpit from which to preach. She told the Lord: “ I’m going home. I quit! And quite truthfully, I told the Lord that if He wanted me to fulfill the calling that He had given, then He could get off His throne and make something happen! I was home for eighteen months, when Baptist Church of the Covenant called me to be the(i)-2.53597(r)2.3690Td (g)9.0621

could apply, with the understanding that she would have to go through the normal application process.

          Pastor Sarah wasn't sure if she wanted to apply for the position. She waited until the last hour. Some of the members of the church realize that she had not applied and they called and asked her to submit her application. Two days from the deadline, she decided to apply. Her hesitation in applying was due to the fact that she did not want to create false hope for herself as well as the church. She did not want to run the risk of being rejected. A national search for a Pastor was being conducted. The Chair of the search committee told her the committee tried not to consider her because they wanted to be fair.

They invited Sarah and her husband Lloyd to a dinner at one of the committee member's homes to have dinner and a conversation. The dinner lasted for three hours and it was an informal interview. When Lloyd and Sarah returned to their car, Lloyd looked at her and said, "I am feeling called, let's go!" She looked at him and said, "But I don't!" She was feeling confusion within her spirit. The committee did not let on as if they wanted her, this deepened her confusion. A few weeks later she was invited to another interview, this time at another committee member's home. They had a few more questions for her. They told her, "We would like to invite you to be our Pastor, and we would like to present you to the congregation." Sarah told them that she was still struggling with the decision.

That same night, the chairman of the committee called her and said, "We want

take the time to think and pray.” Sarah told her father why she was coming to visit. She told him she needed some time to think and pray. Her father allowed her to do what she came to do. He did not questioned her and talk to her about her decision. She was with her father one full week. The last night before she was to return back to Birmingham she and her father was sitting on the porch, on a hot steamy summer night in July. The mosquitoes were not biting because her dad was smoking a cigar and the smoke from it kept the mosquitoes from biting. He rose up from his chair and looked at her and said, “Baby girl, when one or two Baptists can agree on anything, you are to pay attention. But when a committee is unanimous on their decision, you need to listen!”

**L** I came home. Lloyd and I talked about it. I called the chair person and told her that I was ready for the next step. Sarah knew the next step was to preach to the congregation. Since she had been there for about a year they had already heard her preach. So the next step was to be introduced to the community of faith. At one of their

moderator had extended the call. He eventually called me and extended the call of the church and I accepted. So I started the Tuesday after Labor Day. A couple was volunteering to do missionary work in Africa and was denied appointment by the International Mission Board because they had a female Pastor. We had rocks thrown into the windows of the church. There was and still is

part of the call that she receives God's blessings. It was a great sigh of relief, that the challenges she had encountered prove to be worth it. God had brought her through another difficult journey. In being faithful to the call, we learn that we have to go through it to get to it. Sometimes we have to endure the difficulties of life in order to



seated in worship services. After much heated debate, the deacons voted in 1959 not only to seat blacks, but to seat them wherever there was an available seat (McCullough, p23). On December 26, 1961, the church called Reverend James Earl Stallings to be its Pastor. Under his leadership, Reverend Stallings instituted a ministry of trying to learn the names of each member in the church by home visitations, a Civil Rights demonstration in 1963 and a revival that was believed to have a great spiritual effect on the city of Birmingham (Lawson & Strong, p. 25)

Reverend Stallings described the experiences of the Civil Rights as one of the “greatest dilemmas” of his life in Birmingham. The drama of the Civil Rights demonstrations in Birmingham touched the life and ministry of Earl Stallings more directly than any of the white clergymen addressed in Martin Luther King’s letter from The Birmingham Jail. As part of the plan of the SCLC to highlight the hypocrisy of segregation, First Baptist Church was targeted to receive black visitors (Bass, pp70-71). They would begin on Easter Sunday morning, April 14, 1963, and continue several weeks thereafter. Having blacks to visit white churches violated the social custom at that time. The visitors received the reaction that Dr. King and the SCLC had hope for bringing tensions to the surface in a white church and attracting the attention of the national press. These unique visitors inflamed radical segregationist not only in Stallings church but other churches in the Birmingham area as well. These visits brought tremendous pressure and threats upon the Pastors (Bass, p 71).

First Baptist Church was a ministry that Stallings felt called to, and one that his family background had prepared him for. He stated that “The Great Depression taught me the true values of life. It ultimately came down to the fact that I had to make a stand

in Birmingham, because of the values that I learned in my early life. Those ideals included honesty, personal integrity, a willingness to assume responsibility, and respect for the dignity of all humankind, regardless of race.” (Bass, pp72-73)

That Easter Sunday, Reverend Stallings had little time to react to the prospect of black visitors attending his service. Less than an hour prior to the start of the 10:55 a.m. service, Reverend Stallings received word from a reporter that his visitors would soon be arriving. Soon afterwards, civil rights activist Andrew Young and two college age black women entered the crowded sanctuary. Ushers handed them cards and seated them four or five rows from the back of the church (Bass, p. 76). Almost immediately nearly seventy white worshippers left the church in protest. Reverend Stallings later commented that the segregationist action did not represent the way most of the membership felt about welcoming the blacks to the worship service. Two more black women arrived a few minutes after the start of the service and sat with the other activists (Bass, p 77).

Following the service, church members gathered in the streets alongside several reporters and photographers to observe the church’s visitors. SCLC leaders and the news media anticipated a direct confrontation with segregationist elements at First Baptist.

However, as the visitors exited the sanctuary, Stallings greeted Young and his group on

the steps of the church with a heartfelt smile and a warm hanst789(d)-0.956417( p6m59431(w)f(o)-0.958863





and laity) is not willing to come out of their comfort zones and allow the Word of God to



amending of motions, a complicated process through which circumvention of the rules would have allowed the segregationist to achieve an easy victory (McCullough, p 25).

On August 19, the opposition charged Pastor Gilmore with being theologically liberal, “scripturally unsound...and responsible for much of the disunity and disharmony” within the church. In a meeting that lasted eight hours, the divided church voted at 2:30

them to decide. He said, "I believe what we have undertaken here is what God would want us to do." He predicted that the negative vote on the membership question would harm the church, leading to dissolution, schism, or departure from its downtown location. Such a vote would negate the effects of First Baptist ministries both locally and abroad (McCullough, pp. 27-28).

On September 6, a local surgeon, Dr. Bryan Williamson called to order a meeting of individuals concerned with the extremism of the segregationist element in First Baptist – including Judge Grooms, Mrs. Grooms, and Hobart Grooms, Jr. They called themselves the "Company of the Committed." The group consisted of churchgoers who correctly believed that a large portion of the members of First Baptist neither understood nor accepted the 1968 *Confession*. Dr. Williamson suggested several courses of action by which the Company could proceed and concluded with the statement, "We can start a new Church. This would be an open church which would carry on the ministries of the present church and also new ministries (McCullough, p. 28)."



call home. The church and building are open to all and anyone who wishes to become a part of the open membership church. When the Church was constituted, it developed its identity around statements of its beliefs that still lead the congregation today in making decisions. These statements are called: “The Personal and Corporate Commitments.” It continues to hold to its historical Baptist roots. It finds much of its identity in Baptist distinctives like the Priesthood of all Believers, Biblical Freedom, Soul Competency, Local Church Autonomy, Voluntary Association, and Religious Freedom.

Baptist Church of the Covenant thinks differently than most Baptist churches. It is a Baptist church that is progressive in thought and action. It ordains women as Deacons and Ministers. Their membership is open to all people: all races, all socio-economic groups, homosexuals and lesbians. They are the first Baptist church in the state of Alabama to call a female to be their full time pastor. They are a church on the cutting edge, which often times puts them in the local and national news. The church appeared in LIFE magazine in its early days and more recently appeared in TIME magazine for the calling of its current pastor.

Unlike Covenant, First Baptist Church of Birmingham moved their new church to Homewood, Alabama (a suburb of Birmingham). It continues to be predominantly white and, at the time of this writing, has a white South African as its Pastor. First Baptist Church does not seem to have a mission mentality to evangelize its local community, or have converted to a community that is open to all people and races.

Baptist Church of the Covenant has a membership of 416 families. Their membership is based on the ideology, theology and worship of the church. Seventy five percent of its membership lives in and around the Greater Birmingham area, while the

other twenty five percent live outside of the state, but they choose to keep their membership at Covenant by sending in a contribution and/or making an annual visit. Unlike the location of the church which is a low-income area, the membership is comprised of professional people (counselors, lawyers, educators, social workers, etc.), middle management, students, and also illiterate people from off the streets. There is a large contingency of seminary educated people in the congregation.

Members of Covenant contribute a certain percentage of their offerings to other Baptist organizations in which they belong, and they also take up offerings for mission organizations. Members may choose to give their offerings to the Alabama Baptist State Convention, the Cooperative Program of the Southern Baptist Convention, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the Alliance of Baptist, or any combination of these.

Baptist Church of the Covenant believes in ‘putting their money where their mouth is.’ They believe in good worship, which places a high priority on good music. They have had a pipe organ from its inception, even when they met in the office basement for over 20 years. Covenant also has a high priority in helping and serving the mission areas such as Africa, Cuba, Argentina, and closer to home, Hurricane relief on the Gulf Coast.

The church has been served by five Pastors including its current one. Their first Pastor, Dr. Herbert Gilmore, was dignified, scholarly, and determined. He became the voice of God’s message to stand against injustice. Dr. John Whatley, its second Pastor, began to experiment with different worship styles but affirmed a high church style with the dedication of a five-rank pipe organ. For two decades they were a storefront church with a pipe organ (Moye, p3).



Their third Pastor, Dr. Dan Ivins, was energetic, impatient, and passionate. Whether white water rafting, cheering for the Tennessee Volunteers or preaching, he brought vitality to the church. When he saw problems in the city, country, church or the Southern Baptist Convention, he called the church to see them, to open their doors and hearts, and to act on those who were excluded. He challenged Covenant in its young adulthood to remain relevant (Moye, pp 3-4).

Their fourth Pastor, Dr. Roger Lovette, served seven years and had one of the longest tenures of all the Pastors. The church continued to mature, explore what it means to be church in downtown Birmingham at the time. He prodded them through a building fund as the church recommitted itself to be a Southside church in Birmingham. He led them to commit themselves to their spiritual roots, openness to embracing new people, new needs and new future dreams. The church also tore down those barriers that excluded women from leadership in the church. In 1974, women were ordained as deacons for the first time. From 1978 to the present, twelve women have been ordained at Covenant (Moye, p 4). Even though Covenant split from First Baptist Church, it seems to keep one of the elements of the old church, the element of being a “meat grinder” chewing up pastors and staff and spitting them out. All of the former Pastors who have all been activist, have also left under duress.

Their current Pastor, Reverend Sarah Jackson Shelton is leading the church into the 21<sup>st</sup> century as their first female pastor. She hopes to continue to build the church campus by adding ministry and educational space along with a columbarium for those who wish to have their remains cremated. The church is pleased to have their first woman Pastor and looks forward to great things under her leadership.

L A  
A L A A A L L A

When one discerns a call to ministry, one has to know his/her skills, gifts, talents, strengths and weaknesses. These are very important in discovering where best to use what God has given to facilitate and work the call. In discerning our gifts, we must also remember that our gifts are also our crosses and serious realities. The discernment process should start early in one's life. Sarah discovered early in life that she first loved God and the people of God. One gift that Sarah observed from her father is that of having a sense of morality and integrity. Sarah strives to be a person with a sound moral background and principle. In her daily life, these qualities are articulated.

Another gift that Sarah possesses is that of being very compassionate. One may say that this gift is part of being a woman, but for her as a Pastor it helps her to be able to be present to her people, not only the women but also the men whom she ministers to and with. Her gift of compassion helps her to be able to walk with her people, especially when they are walking through the shadow of death.

The ability of trying to be present to all people is another one of her gifts that stretches her as a Pastor. Some Pastors are selective about who they will spend time. She makes an effort to be there for everybody. You may say this is impossible, but she tries and oftentimes succeeds. Another special thing that she does as a Pastor is to try to send a personal postcard every eighteen months to her church members to encourage them. To be able to do this and do it successfully means that she has to be very organized. This gift requires a lot of time. As she gives of her time, she realizes that being intentional and personal that it is taking time away from studies and family. She is



*h n remaining true to the purpose s he s gn of good e der- h n ng  
 spec f c y of ho h s ch rch r ed ro nd r h hen so e of her fe o  
 p s ors ere cr c z ng her nd ye she d d no sho re enge o rd he she  
 o d n e he o co e nd nd co n c e- he h d se er e e n  
 e rs- hey h d co e n r her rrog n y she re ned r e o her p rpose  
 of sho ng Chr s s o e nd h s h rd o do hen yo re eng c ed-*

Her staff members made the following comments:

*r h es o get things done- h n she s c e r o h she n s e ch of  
 s nd d y o do- he s ery c e r o h she n s e ch of s o e  
 c re of- c y h e fo nd her o e ore d rec e h n o her p s ors h e  
 or ed h n er s of s yng o d yo do h s o d yo do h - he  
 de eg es o- he h s n A person y ype- he s ch n o p nn ng nd  
 ge ng h ngs done- e n d nce-*

*he s ery ch a people person- he s pre y good ge ng o her peop e s  
 s or es nd no ng h s go ng on h he - he see s o e pre y n ne o  
 he person s ff of rge n er of ch rch e ers- No on y does she foc s  
 on he ch rch e ers her s ff s e - he re y es n n eres n s-*

*he s de nd ng she doesn e pec ny ore of s s she e pec s of  
 herse f- he p s n y h yo n o do he h ngs she s s of yo -*

I asked the staff what did they see as her . . .  .

*n s o go so ch s r h s he p ng he ch rch go n he d rec on h he  
ch rch h s chosen o go n-*

r hf nd hen o he, oy pr o con c or eng r h hes e e  
so h hey hn she spr ch ng, s o he - h s he pr she s ery  
spr - he s n ne h he pr nd so h s h h ppens nd she r s s  
he ch rch o s y h s s h e re go ng o do h no - h s h gh  
e e - h s h ds ng sh her s he e e of r s h she h s for he  
congreg on h ch s hy hn she doesn fee e she h s o con ro he  
process- he doesn h e o e s re e ery ody no s here she s nds nd  
ge he ord o h re y n h s o h ppen- he pro y h s ne or e  
s on for he ch rch she es nd r s s he ch rch s ody o de e op he  
s on nd o c rry o - he sn n con ro of h she s fne no eng n  
con ro of h -

To sum it up, Sarah possesses certain leadership skills that are unique to her. That uniqueness has to do with her being a woman, wife, mother, and most of all a child of God. A good Pastoral Leader should have a good sense of his/her call. They must know

*h ch h e ne er he rd e p s or do- he ge s peop e o cry ho re*





o r cho r d rec ors de o r cho r oo good e o co e o he  
 conc s on he cho r es o r cho r d rec ors oo good- o don no h ch  
 y yo d go s een s ch h h s ch rch ody se e ds- see r h  
 e ng co ed o e ng he p s or of h s fe o sh p no d rec ng ryng  
 o eep on he r gh r c - B h sense of c ng goes c o no h e her  
 o n gend he gend of h s peop e nd he p o e d he nd g de he nd  
 h n h s refec e of s rong y nd her y o d p o h here she  
 c n he p o d nd sh pe nd p r her h n p sh-

The following comment is from a member of the church who is a person of color.

The comment expresses a view of a need for Sarah and the staff to have some type of diversity training in order for her and the staff to be more effective in the area of multi-cultural ministry.

here re so so e s gges ons h e g en P s or r h h she s fo o ed  
 hro gh on he - B g ess s e er of co or ys on dered h n  
 h here s ore e see n go ern en genc es h spend ore e h s  
 send ng s hro gh **diversity training**- And h n h h s so e h ng s yo  
 o n er of peop e h s here on s ff h hey e ne er een hro gh  
 BCOC gh e he frs ch rch hey e h d s f r s d ers y nd s ff e h -  
 One h ng h f nd so e es h rd o ge ong h h hey re peop e h  
 y h e s gh nders nd ng of ye hn c y h n hey need o go  
 hro gh d ers y r n ng- o d he p he o nders nd here e e een  
 here e re go ng s he ps- don no hy he ch rch s ys he s o  
 fo o eh nd so e go ern en h ngs- B s o ns r c y h e h re  
 peop e here h s ch rch- One q es on e s ed s e yo een n o her  
 congreg ons h s een ed congreg on h h h h yo h e o  
 nders nd s h here s d fferen soc z on h co es h o r e hn c y-  
 don n o e ne per en - don nd o cer n po n h n h  
 f here s so e ype of r n ng here yo co d h e h c n e ch yo ore  
 o ho yo de h d ers y- h n h ho e s ff needs o do h  
 ns e d of nd of fee ng he r y o h - M er off c s h s gro p h  
 here s no nor y on ny e ders h p pos on n he ch rch s g ess q e  
 e ng o h s ch rch nd here hey re s f r s e ng nc s e nd  
 c r - h n ec se he ch rch so e e go opened p nd s d  
 e re open nd ccep ng o c s- B g ess orry o for he e  
 h e een here s h e e een here e s BCOC s open- B openness  
 doesn e n so ch h yo h e o go nd yo ccep peop e s nds of  
 peop e yo so sho d e rn so e h ng fro he s ch s h hey e rn  
 fro yo - And don e c y ge h BCOC nd h -pe d - n d - s - - c h - - o - - e -

*And in the leadership of BCOC should be more serious and of  
high energy performance and of high quality-*

Every gifted person has serious crosses in their lives. The things that we like to do, the things that gives us the most pleasure are the things that cause us most stress. The answer to the problems of Sarah's and any person's serious reality is to learn how to manage our gifts and realities. To sum it up, Sarah's serious realities are those things that are her gifts. The serious realities that some members of the congregation have cited are the sense of call, responsibility, intent focus on getting things done, emotional investment

5.) Look at things theoretically

These activities are very true to the person of Sarah. In the interview process with her church members, a number of her members stated that she was into planning, she loves to write and she takes the time to think out her plans before she executes them.


The next area of the grid is  This part of the grid shows that Sarah is probably:

- 1.) Detached and concentrative
- 2.) Organized and consistent

She also tends to be:

- 1.) Insightful
- 2.) Selectively sociable
- 3.) Thoughtful

Because Sarah is a creative person, she oftentimes likes to be by herself and do the things she likes to do. She likes to be around people, but she may not necessarily attend receptions because of her selective process to have quality conversations with others. She is very thoughtful of other peoples' feelings and she will oftentimes call, send a note, or email individuals to check on them.

 is another area on the grid that describes the kind of support or motivation a person needs to show their usual style. Sarah's score shows that she may respond well to an environment, which encourages a subjective approach. To be most effective, Sarah may respond best to people who are reflective and creative. She is most comfortable when people around her do the following:

- 1.) Show they appreciate you
- 2.) Are interested in feelings as well as logic
- 3.) Give you time for complex decisions
- 4.) Give you time alone or with one or two others
- 5.) Don't over schedule you

Sarah's staff can resonate with this section of the grid. They feel that she is organized, into scheduling and being on time. She is intent on making sure that her flock is taking care of. One can look at her planning and see that she schedules her time, and that she tries to include many in her schedule. However, she is very good about keeping her Thursdays and Fridays for herself and family.

The final area of the grid describes the **behavior** of an individual. This area looks at behavior that individuals may exhibit when stressed. Sarah's stress behavior may include the following:

- 1.) Withdrawing
- 2.) Fatigued
- 3.) Indecisive
- 4.) Pessimistic
- 5.) Overly sensitive to criticism

Sarah usually withdraws when she is under stress. She knows in order to overcome the stress she needs to bring projects that she may be involved in to a close. She also needs to have direct communication in order to work. These tie in with her need to be able to set and organize her goals

Sarah Shelton is a woman called by God to lead people to God. She is in her way another Mary. Mary the Mother of God was one who heard the Word of God and believed in His Word. God called Mary and asked her to bear a child. Mary was the Theotokos, the bearer of God for the world and the nation. Mary's call from God was one that she embraced but one that caused her great controversy and pain. Mary remained faithful to her call, and is honored by all Catholics. Sarah, like Mary, is one who heard the call of Jesus to pastor His people. Her call has been one of controversy

because she is a woman in a denomination that does not believe. The Baptist believe that women should not pastor. They do not embrace her call to follow Jesus in the way that she has responded to Jesus. This call, which is dear to her heart, is one that causes her pain.

Her pain, of others not recognizing her call and respecting it and her brokenness allows her to minister to others. Like Mary, her pain is deep, because it is one of rejection, respect and love, but it is one that causes her and her community confusion, because they cannot understand how its church principles and teachings of Jesus are blatantly rejected. However, she continues to remain faithful to seeking her God and serving her God. She is a “Theotokos”, because she tries in word and deed to help, people come to know Jesus and serve Him. Sarah’s people, the Baptist Church of the Covenant are very proud and honored to have her as a Pastor.

In her own words, Sarah says, *h n so e of he h ngs e ro gh o h s congreg on n p r c r h heyh en h d efore re h n heyh e h d p s ors ho re re y good n he p p nd h n hey e h d p s ors ho h e h d g dre s nd g s ons- h h e ro gh o he n d fferen y s p s or ho h s co p ss on e he r nd ho s ng o he ey of he sh do h he so o spe nd ho s ng o do h no er ho he e er s- And so e of he p s ors here ho h e done h n he p s h he r fro he congreg on s h hey o d on y do h cer n se ec ones- hope h e p o do s f*

*- e- ff -e -r - ff offer yse-f done - offer - ysef o e dry-odlyC -o -p -f-y- -odf -c -p -ye-fff - - - -e-ee- de -h --r- sn- ngs-*

call, to listen, to speak, to act. Mary had a “Magnificat” (Luke 1:36-48) a moment in her life when she realized what God had done, was doing and was going to do. Mary’s Magnificat was her song of Praise and Thanksgiving to God for bringing her through. It was her reason to celebrate. Sarah too has a Magnificat. She knows her God, and she knows what God has done, what God is doing, and what God said he would do. Therefore, Sarah can celebrate! Because her being encountered God through the experience of pain, rejection and jubilation, her being gives thanks to God. Sarah Shelton can say,

“L

