

Akilah Atkinson Spiritual Autobiography

When reflecting on how my past experiences have shaped my theology as a future teaching elder in the PCUSA, I considered the importance of three core values my parents instilled in my siblings and me. First, respect is given, not earned. This value was explicitly stated and demonstrated by my father, who encouraged us to show respect to everyone we encountered by smiling, looking them in the eye, and saying hello. When questioned about the necessity of such a greeting to people who were openly mean or dismissive, my father reminded us that as Christians our job was to always represent our family and our faith in the best possible light. Therefore, we were expected to always be kind to everyone, without exception, and without the expectation that others would reflect the same kindness to us. As a result, even today when I am challenged to respond in anger or compassion, the Holy Spirit will remind me of the power of Christ's sacrificial and redeeming love that is freely and undeservedly given to all of God's creation.

The other two core values my parents instilled in my siblings and me are the importance of having foundational cultural knowledge and a strong faith in God and Christ. We were initially taught these values by listening to our parents read simplified biblical stories from a children's Bible every night, and my mother would always point out where on the atlas these stories took place. We would then discuss what the story meant to us before saying our prayers and going to bed. Eventually, my mother would take us to the library every Saturday to get new books for our weekly book reports. One report would be about a historical Black figure, and the other would be about a biblical figure. As we grew older, we were also required to participate in community events that expanded our knowledge of various cultures and religions, and to memorize and recite a Bible verse after my father prayed to bless the dinner food. These family

rituals were the early foundation for a fascination with and love of God's word as interpreted through the Bible within me. I also began to view the Creator as being personally and practically involved in all aspects of human life.

The combination of these core values led me to seek ordination in the PCUSA because I have a strong desire for others to experience the unconditional, self-affirming love I encounter in my daily faith with God. Specifically, having experienced the positive effect that learning African-American history had on allowing me to see possibilities rather than problems in my brown skin, through my seminary coursework, I am also discovering that combining deep biblical knowledge with other cultural knowledge (e.g., Middle Eastern, Native American, LGBTQIA) will assist me in spreading God's love through Christ to those within my immediate sphere of influence.

Prior to enrolling in seminary, I never considered that the work of a teaching elder could also involve working with the Triune Being to make impactful social justice changes in my local community or simply living my life in such a way that Christ's redemptive message of liberation in all areas of human life could be seen and felt by anyone I have the privilege of meeting, even if only briefly as we pass by each other on the sidewalk. After completing my seminary studies, I hope that as a teaching elder I will be able to use scripture and the *Book of Confessions* to illuminate the redemptive message of the Gospel in ways that are culturally relatable and experientially relevant to a diverse group of believers, and that I will be able to help create a church community that more accurately reflects the agapic love of the Triune Being and actively demonstrates this love to all of God's creation.