

After graduating from UNC and years of moving around the country for jobs, graduate schools and plain old wanderlust, John and I were feeling ready to put down permanent roots. When our first child was born in Los Angeles, we knew it was time for these Beverly Hillbillies to head home to North Carolina. So we loaded up the truck and moved to Chapel Hill.

Though we were both raised Presbyterian, I didn't want to just automatically join the big church on Franklin Street. I wanted to select our church home carefully. I wanted what I had as a child at First Presbyterian in Hickory -- a place where I was nurtured and loved, and where I still feel at home today.

So, I did some comparison shopping. There are a lot of lovely congregations in the area, but this was the place. I loved the traditional music, the outstanding preaching, and saying "debts" instead of "trespasses." But honestly, what tipped the scales was seeing so many engaged teenagers here every Sunday. UPC clearly had a vibrant youth program, and I wanted that for 9-month-old baby Wade.

Fast-forward 16 years, and that youth program is still vibrant. In fact, Wade and little sister Eleanor are in Montreat right now with Kim McNeill, Beth Visser and all the wonderful youth advisors. PYC and Youth choir are cherished priorities in my family's life, as are so many of the other good works going on here.

John and I joined this church because of the programming, but we've stayed because of something much stronger. University Church is where our faith is shaped, challenged and strengthened. It's where we're welcomed and loved unconditionally. It's where we participate when we can, and where we are carried when that's what we need.

It's a place where the Holy Spirit abides. I feel it every time we sing the "Kyrie Eleison" and collect "Pennies for Hunger." I feel it when Bob preaches and when I see a fellow UPC member at the grocery store. The Holy Spirit is there when Anna does "Time with Children" and visits the hospital. I feel it when the Chancel Choir sings and when I work in the IFC kitchen. And it is in the Session meetings when the Elders decide how to allocate our offerings to sustain and grow the important programming which drew me here in the first place.

I'm a grateful and proud member of this community of faith. In fact, I have a hard time imagining my life without this place and each of you.

Please join me next week on Dedication Sunday. I hope you will feel the Holy Spirit's peace as you share God's abundance in the form of your pledge to our church home.

Ashley Wilson

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