

Bishop Shelton's Backstory

Everybody has a backstory! I'm Connie Shelton, the new bishop for the North Carolina Conference of The United Methodist Church, the Raleigh Episcopal area, and here's my backstory. I'm a native of South Mississippi born and reared in a little town called Picayune located on the Mississippi-Louisiana line.

When I was nine years old, my beautiful mother died of cancer. She was 37 years old. My dad, a faithful U.S. postal worker, raised my sister, my brother, and me all by himself for the next 14 years.

I share that story with you because living as a motherless child shapes who I am and how I understand my calling and ministry. Our life was always hanging by a thread, and Jesus was always near. And the body of Christ, the church, always showed up for my family in our suffering.

Eugene Peterson's translation of Psalm 34:18 says, "If your heart is broken, you'll find God right there; if you're kicked in the gut, God will help you catch your breath."

God is always with the brokenhearted, and the church always joins God by showing up for the brokenhearted and helping them catch their breath. Are you willing?

So, here is my backstory on my education and family. I received Communications degrees from the University of Southern Mississippi. In my last semester of undergraduate school, I was doing television commercials for my favorite fast-food restaurant in Mississippi, Ward's Hamburgers! If you've never had a Ward's hamburger, make a note that if you're traveling through Mississippi, get a burger with chili, cheese, mustard, mayonnaise, pickles, and onions. I worked at Ward's Hamburgers in high school and college. I was the drive-thru girl. I digress.

So, I was in my last semester of undergraduate school, and I went to Ward's corporate office to see one of the owners, Richard Ward. When I walked in, I saw this young guy who caught my attention. I went into Mr. Ward's office and said, "Who's the guy out front?" Mr. Ward said, "Oh, he just works next door." In a few moments, Mr. Ward invited me to go to the break room to have a soft drink, and when I walked into the break room, there was the guy. Mr. Ward said, "Connie Mitchell, I'd like for you to meet Joey Shelton, Joey Shelton, Connie Mitchell." I could hardly manage to get out the words, "It's nice to meet you," to which he replied, "The pleasure is all mine." One year later, the guy, Joey Shelton, became my husband. March 2023 we will celebrate our 36th year of marriage. Thanks be to God!

Joey was practicing law when we married. After seven years of marriage, I began wrestling with a call to ministry. At the time I was working as a layperson with The United Methodist Hour, Mississippi's television and radio ministry. And at the same time, I was having this deep yearning for more study and deeper formation. I had this insatiable thirst. Strangely, I wasn't sharing that with Joey because I thought, "What's he gonna do, leave law practice and take me to divinity school?" One evening, Joey came home and looked very serious, and said we need to talk. Joey said, "I feel God calling me to divinity school." And I said, "Me too!" We stayed up all night that night praying and crying. We said yes to the Lord's calling but had no idea what that meant. That was 1993, and over the next year, we planned and prepared to sell everything and go to seminary. So in the fall of 1994, Joey and I moved from Mississippi to North Carolina and began our master of divinity degree at Duke Divinity School 29 years ago. God used our three years at Duke Divinity School to shape and inform and transform our lives. It is a gift that keeps on giving.

We received our Master of Divinity in 1997. And at this point, we had been married for 10 years, and we had been brokenhearted by infertility. We were returning to Mississippi to co-pastor three churches. And it was at this most stressful time in our life, we found out I was pregnant. So our firstborn daughter, Bailey, was born in January of 1998. Bailey is now adulting and

works at the Mississippi Children's Foundation as their Communications and Outreach Director.

Five years later after Bailey was born, we found out I was pregnant. And Jessica came into the world in 2003, and she is now a sophomore at Mississippi State University. And I'm not going to lie, the hardest part of being here with you is the distance from my crew. But we have already found new creative ways to stay connected, like texting each other during Wheel of Fortune to see who texts the puzzle correct first!

My husband Joey serves as the Dean of the Chapel at Millsaps College in Jackson, Mississippi, and he's going to join me here after he completes his teaching commitment this semester. So know that we have many dates on the calendar so that our family can stay connected.

So, that's a portion of my backstory. Because when I was growing up, maybe this happened in your community, people would say, "Now where you from?" or, "Who are your parents?" or, "Who are your people?" They were asking all of these questions because there was a very real desire to find connection. Our connection always begins by sharing our backstory. And I'm sharing all of this with you because I want you to know me, and I want to know you. Our relationship is the center of our life together. Our mission is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, and as Discipleship Ministries Former General Secretary, the late Dr. Junius Dotson said, "discipleship begins with relationship." We're able to be connectional through our relationships across North Carolina so that we can build relationships with all those who are suffering in our communities. Our connection exists to bear witness to Jesus's resurrection alongside those whose lives and families are hanging on by a thread.

I also share my backstory with you because we are in a very strange time. In today's climate, there's a temptation by many people to ask questions, not for meaningful connection, but instead to "size people up" or "put them in their place" or find some nugget of information to exploit. Sisters and brothers, by God's grace, let's not label each other. Let's not make

assumptions about each other, but instead, let's give each other the benefit of the doubt, living into our baptism, where we've been named and claimed by God and raised to new life through Jesus. We belong to God, and we belong to each other. That is such good news! By the power of the triune God through the waters of baptism, let's now, together, behave like Jesus. So, that's my backstory.