

## **New Minister Information**

Priscilla Durkin  
Beverly Dempsey  
Ann Graham-Johnson  
Larry Graham-Johnson

**Statement of Faith**  
**Priscilla Bingham Durkin**  
**September 2021**

I believe that God, the creator of all, **was**, and **is**, and **always shall be**. There was not a time when God was not. God exists as Trinity in Parent, Son, and Holy Spirit. This Triune God is the only God we worship. God is sovereign and almighty. God is merciful and just. God's providence is reality.

God created humanity to be in covenant relationship with God. We were lovingly created, not to subdue the rest of creation selfishly, but to care for it wisely. We were created in the image of God, promised provision of our needs, and asked only to be obedient. We separated ourselves from God (we sinned) when we grasped for more than we needed. We cannot restore a right relationship with God (attain salvation) by our own efforts. Salvation is a gift of grace, made possible through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ, and the work of the Holy Spirit.

I believe in Jesus as a person of particular history and a divine member of the Trinity of universal history. Jesus was and is a challenge to the orthodox way of secular and religious living and practice. He completed and fulfilled the meaning of baptism and the Passover meal. Baptism became more than a symbol of the forgiveness of sins. Baptism symbolizes God's initiative in extending unmerited grace to include us in God's family. The sacrament of baptism is done once and once only and does not depend on belief or declaration by the baptized. The Lord's Supper is a sign, not just of deliverance from human bondage, but a deliverance from death and a celebration of life. The sacrament represents the complete giving of God to us – God's outpouring of life, through willing brokenness, sacrifice, and sharing.

Jesus came into the world not to judge, but to save the world. Jesus was revolutionary, and often behaved in ways that were not understood. He expanded the traditional understanding of right and wrong into an inclusive foundational gospel of compassion, servanthood, and liberation. He demonstrated how we are to relate to God, to ourselves, and to the rest of creation. He died on the cross for the sin of humankind. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is a sign for all time that even the powers of death and the rejections of humankind cannot thwart the plans of God for creation.

Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would come to comfort and inform us – to be our advocate. We have been given the Holy Spirit to guide us in this life, as we respond in affirmation of faith and obedience. We are also to be guided by the Bible and by our creeds and confessions. The Bible is the unique and authoritative story of the plans of God and God's faithfulness to creation. The Bible's truth is a living truth – revealed to us by the Holy Spirit. The Church exists as the Body of Christ, as both a representative of, and a beacon to, the Realm of God. This Realm is not simply of the world to come, but for us today. "We have no mission but to serve in full obedience to our Lord: to care for all, without reserve, and spread Christ's liberating word." (fifth verse, "The Church of Christ in Every Age" #320 in Glory to God hymnal)

**Faith Journey**  
**Priscilla Bingham Durkin**  
**October, 2021**

I was born in eastern North Carolina to a United Methodist pastor father and a public school teacher mother (and yes, you can see that our family was very work-oriented). I grew up completely surrounded by the love and support and direction of three siblings who were 14, 17, and 20 years old when I entered planet earth. Believe it or not I was not a surprise – my parents intended to adopt a child and planned for me to grow up with her. The adoption did not work out, and I essentially grew up with the benefits/attitudes of being an only child.

I never had a baby sitter – I accompanied my father on pastoral calls and attended all church worship services (often 5 or so per week). I earned perfect attendance pins every year of my life until I was a senior in high school. I learned early how to be seen and not heard. My observation and listening skills were developed and honed over the years. I sang in church choirs, played the piano and organ at worship services, and was active in youth group programs and leadership.

I do not remember a time when I was not a believer. The children's song "Into My Heart" was etched early into my essence.

When I went to college, I took a vacation from most church activities. It wasn't until I was married and had children that I re-examined my attitude toward the church and the importance of making it a vital part of my existence. For most of my adult life after becoming a parent, I have been active in a variety of church-related activities, including choir (vocal and bell), teaching (confirmation and adult classes), and Stephen Ministry. While I was clerk of session, I started and facilitated a weekly support group of session members to encourage spiritual formation and growth.

Just before I turned 40, my father died. He had been my rock, and his death initiated a period of deep introspection within me. I decided to take a seminary class, which ultimately led to my leaving the business world and becoming ordained as a teaching elder in the PCUSA.

I pastored two churches in Wadesboro, NC and Morven, NC for about 10 years. I often felt gratitude to my parents during that time for the spiritual foundation they provided for me in my early years.

The last 10 years of my active employ were spent as a chaplain in a NC state prison. This was a PCUSA validated ministry. During that time, I became increasingly called to minister to the marginalized. My personal faith continued to deepen at this point in my life. My commitment to daily disciplines of devotional reading and prayer became unwavering.

At this time, I feel called to continue in active church involvement and to "do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with [our] God" (Micah 6:8). I value the support and comradery of brother and sister believers and treasure the awareness and obligation of being part of the Body of Christ.

**Statement of Faith**  
**Rev. Beverly Dempsey**

I believe in one God, who is creator, redeemer and sustainer of all.

I believe in God the Creator who creates each one of us in God's image. God has known each one of us since before the foundations of the earth were drawn as integral to God's plan for the ever-widening boundaries of hope for all people. As God continually creates life and opportunities for new life within every being, even our most circuitous journeys make sense. God is love.

I believe in the Redeemer, Jesus Christ. His love of God, communion with all people, and power over death are shared with us as the Word of God. This is our unique and authoritative guide. Since we fail to follow Jesus, he follows us even into the darkest places to retrieve us, forgive us from our sin and destruction and bring us to healing and salvation. Jesus is hope.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the breath of God that sustains all life and motivates us to love and glorify God. The Holy Spirit draws us together and binds us as one people from the beginning through the eternity. The Holy Spirit is our peace.

I believe in the church as the body of Jesus Christ at work in the world, together with the church triumphant. The church is drawn together by the Holy Spirit as a body of interdependent, chosen ones throughout humanity. Comprised of people from all time and place whom God is continually forming and reforming, the church is continually becoming the church God needs to bring about justice in a world so desperately wanting. The church celebrates our unity with Christ, his grace and his mercy through the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper.

I believe that baptism is an outward sign and seal of God's grace for a body. Through the nourishing waters of baptism, we are reminded that God continually cleanses us of our sins and sets us free to be children of our God who will never let us go.

I believe that the Lord's Supper is spiritual nourishment for God's children. The elements of this meal – juice of the vine and bread common to the people - symbolize Jesus' body and blood. They act as a reminder that Christ willingly gave his life on the cross in order for each one of us to be eternally saved from the depths of our sin.

The Reverend Beverly Dempsey  
Faith Journey  
November 15, 2021

Those who have known me since early childhood are quick to point out that it was a pure mixture of nature and nurture that led me to ministry.

My family is a God-loving, country-living, family-bonded lot. We are farmers and steel workers, formally educated and not. Most live in Ohio. I am one of a few who flew the coop.

My grandfather was the first baby on the cradle roll of Hilltop Presbyterian Church. My grandmother was the first woman elder ordained in the Upper Ohio Valley Presbytery. My mother was the first woman Moderator of UOV Presbytery. Three of my uncles are Presbyterian ministers; one on the other side of the family's a Methodist. My stepsister is a PCUSA pastor. Here I am: all about church.

Together with my family, I believe in the redemptive power of a life in Christ, both while we are on earth and when we rise in the kingdom to come. Together with my family, I strive to bring about that kingdom through good works, active community engagement and prayer. Together, we go to PW, host the City Rescue Mission Christmas Party, tutor less advantaged children, direct church camps and knit prayer shawls.

In 2001, with a successful stint in banking, an MBA and about ten years in strategic marketing behind me, I called my childhood pastor's son to say that I felt a call to the ministry. His response was simple, "You didn't stand a chance."

With a business education, strategic marketing experience, theological education and a pastoral desire to support it all, I believed that I was duly called to be an intentional interim pastor. My first three ministry contexts brought it all together. Each congregation prioritized worship and prayer while emphasizing evangelism and mission. 1 Corinthians and Matthew 25 lent structure to our praise and productivity: the body of Christ holds the world together; service was our grateful response.

Ten years into my interim ministry, I learned about Jan Hus Presbyterian Church in New York City. I was attracted by its relentless pursuit of justice for the most marginalized among us, and I was intrigued by the congregation's inversion of emphasis from worship to mission. This emphasis on service over

worship is widely known by those who know about Jan Hus at all. As a matter of fact, when I called an “Avenue Pastor” about the opportunity to serve Jan Hus, he declared, “They’re not a worshipping body!” I heard my call. Here was a church with a mission, a building and a membership, acting as the body of Christ attending to the brokenness of the world. They needed to worship. We could build that. And indeed, we did both build and worship, tenderly holding our mission to serve the deepest hungers.

This past spring, in the midst of the COVID crisis and all of the twists and turns it has brought, my family decided to move to Florida while I maintained my call in New York City. I would spend part of my week tending to my church and the other part tending my family in Florida. This proved to be untenable.

Since our family’s completely unexpected migration to Florida this summer, I’ve been away from them much more than anyone anticipated. This was especially taxing on Owen, now 10, and Caitlin, nearly 7. By the end of the summer, we agreed that I would join the geese and finish my migration South. Serving Highlands United Presbyterian Church as their interim pastor will allow me to continue serve the local church in the deeply connectional way I was raised while raising my own family in the way that they deserve.

## STATEMENT OF FAITH: By Rev. Ann Graham-Johnson

*“God is Love.”* (I John 4:8c)

*“In God we live and move and have our being...”* (Acts 17:28a)

“God is Love:” the One who spoke me into being, in whom I exist, who surrounds me with grace, and births faith in me. God is infinite Mystery, who cannot be limited to my definitions and understanding. Yet, I seek to describe God through the metaphors of human experience:

God is our parent, loving us and all creation into existence, and longing to nurture us toward wholeness;

God is the current that connects us with all creation;

God is the breath we breathe, giving us life and vitality;

God is the rock foundation of our existence;

God is the source of our deepest purpose and meaning, and the fire which ignites it;

God is the light by which we can see the unseen;

God is the love and grace which nurtures our relationships;

God is the presence in, and surrounding us and the illusive One whom we cannot grasp;

God is the root of our joy and companion in our pain;

God is the hope which beckons us, and the new possibility in every situation.

God is.

To be in God’s image is to be in relationship with God and others. Sin is the opposite of relationship, the opposite of Godlikeness. Sin is that which separates us from God and others, turning our desire for relationship into a will toward ourselves, destroying peace, perverting justice, and damaging creation. Yet God loves us and reaches out to us:

in Jesus Christ through whom we experience God’s reconciling love,

in Scripture, the inspired and authoritative witness to God’s reconciling love in Christ,

in human love and our participation in each other’s lives,

in the songs and mysteries of the natural world,

Jesus Christ, as Son of God shows us what it means to be both human and divine, what it means to be in relationship:

in his life Christ reveals God’s grace and saving purpose, which reaches across all barriers,

in his ministry he reached out to those in need, the marginalized by society, revealing love which is greater than law and is the fulfillment of the law,

in his suffering he reveals power expressed through vulnerability,

in his death he reveals the depth of sin and God’s unfathomable love and forgiveness,

in his resurrection he reveals God’s power over sin and death, raising us to Life in Him, and affirms that there is nothing in life or death that can “separate us from the love of God, ...” (Romans 8:38-39).

God, the Holy Spirit is “everywhere the giver and renewer of life.” (*The Constitution of the PCUSA; “A Brief Statement of Faith”*) The Holy Spirit calls us to faith, nurtures growth in us, and empowers and unites us with God and all creation.

As the incarnate body of Christ, the Church is called to reveal Christ in all places of need. Committed to the family of God in the waters of baptism, guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit, nourished by the presence of Christ in the bread and the wine, and commissioned by Christ, we are called to be the incarnate body of Christ, and proclaim in word and deed the reconciling love of God in a broken world, looking in hope to the final realization of creation’s redemption. Amen.



## **My Faith Journey: By Rev. Ann Graham-Johnson**

*"I am convinced that neither death nor life...nor things present nor things to come...nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."* (Rom. 8:38 & 39)

*"We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."* (T.S. Eliot). I spoke these words to summarize my faith journey when I was examined in this Presbytery to be ordained and installed in my first church in 1989.

I grew up in the home of a Presbyterian Minister. As a four-year-old I asked my father if I was a Methodist, a Catholic or what. He said, *"You are an Orthodox Presbyterian, and don't forget it."* This form of orthodoxy became so much a part of my identity that it was an inner earthquake to struggle with other views in the turmoil of the 1960's and 1970's. This led me into some 15 years of "wilderness wandering," as I searched for meaning and a theology or spirituality on which I could base my life. Eventually I ended up at a convent under the spiritual direction of Sr. Elaine Prevallet. As I poured out my searching and confusion to her, she responded: *"What you have is enough!"* I couldn't accept it, but the reality of this finally brought me in tears to my knees. I came to realize that it did not take the right theology with which to align my beliefs, it did not take stilling my doubts. God's grace was enough!

At that time, I was a psychotherapist at an adult day treatment center. As much as I valued my work and clients I felt called to ministry. Within a month of my convent experience I entered Columbia Theological Seminary. What an enriching opportunity to continue exploration! I questioned, sometimes skeptically, as I searched for words to express my faith experience.

In 1989, speaking before St. Augustine Presbytery I was beginning to sense that *"knowing the place for the first time"* was much more than a cerebral knowing, it was a multilayered experience, going *beyond understanding*, into the richness of God's grace. What I did not fully realize was that *all of life* was indeed a pilgrimage of *"not ceasing exploration."* I have pastored in eleven churches in Florida, Illinois, Ohio, North Carolina, Arizona, and New Mexico, served as Hospital Chaplain, and Director of Disaster Recovery in Florida following Hurricane Charlie. Some positions were interim positions, some were part time in conjunction with other positions. Sometimes I made mistakes, fell and God picked me up, Sometimes I had no idea what to do and God led blind me (Isa. 42:16)! There were exciting and rewarding times, and times as Fredrick Buechner wrote, I was "better than I knew how to be." I learned my ministry was about all of us together. I learned that to teach my people, I had to learn from them.

I have continued my exploration through seminars with colleagues at Ghost Ranch, mediation training with the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center, Acts 16:12 Initiative, trips to Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Mexico, and doctoral work at Ashland Theological Seminary.

In this my third retirement, I am discovering that the exploration is continuing, that God still has ministry for me in some form. It was said that the great flutist, Pablo Casals, at the age of 96 had to be helped to the piano every day, where he practiced for hours. When asked why he bothered to do this, he replied, "*Because I have something of overriding importance to do.*" May this always be so for me.

I believe that "*to do justice, embrace faithful love, and walk attentively with God*" (Micah 6:8) is of overriding importance. The Church faces challenges such as you and I have never faced before: times of polarization, disruption, chaos, and change, as a Church, as a culture, and as a world. We cannot go back to how things were. I have heard and felt the pain of those who fear and believe that anything new is bad. Our Brief Statement of Faith declares: *In a broken and fearful world the Spirit gives us courage to pray without ceasing, to witness to all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior, to unmask idolatries in Church and culture, to hear the voices of people long silenced, and to work with others for justice freedom and peace.*" (Book of Confessions, 10.4) I pray for the Church, that we may have the courage to continue to explore God's love and will, open our hearts to all people, and that we will have the faith and courage to greet with joy and *holy expectation the new things* God can do with us and through us. Amen!

Statement of Faith  
*Rev. Larry C. Graham-Johnson, HR*  
*October 25, 2021*

“The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?” (Psalm 27:1 NRSV) This powerful statement of faith from a Psalmist, one who is being threatened from every side, acknowledges that the Oneness that created all that exists, is also the Love which surrounds the human creature and all creation and is eternal, ever present, and always accepting.

This Oneness we call God, has called us into being to be in community, to love one another, and to be a support and to comfort all those sent to us. We are called to bear witness to that Love exemplified in the life of Christ Jesus our Risen Lord, so that “every knee should bend, . . . and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,” (Philippians 2:10-11).

Having observed the human condition in much the same way that God also observed the plight of the Israelites enslaved in Egypt, God sent a rescuer, in the form of a child. Born of Mary, this Jesus grew to become the source of our salvation. Early in his ministry, Jesus recognized his mission was to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free,” (Luke 4:18). This call would be passed on to his disciples and to all who would follow in Christ’s footsteps.

Unjustly accused by those religious leaders, who chose not to hear the good news of the gospel, and fearing a supposed threat to the empire, with whom they had established a prosperous relationship, Jesus was tortured and put to death on what was then a symbol of corrupt power, the cross. However, what was a dreaded device of capital punishment, became our symbol of Divine Hope. Met head on, death was overcome for all time in the Resurrection of the Christ, who suffered and died for the sake of those so loved by Love.

As promised to his apprehensive disciples, who, at the time, could not comprehend Jesus’ talk of dying, God provided the Holy Spirit, an Advocate, to continue to nurture and support the work of redemption begun in Christ Jesus. As the Wind, the Breath, the Spirit of God moved across the waters of Creation, so this same Spirit, Holy, creative by its very nature, moves across all lives in the cosmos and especially those who follow the living Christ. This Spirit speaks to that spirit buried deep inside each human being, praying when we do not know how to pray, grieving with us during life’s anguish, celebrating with us in our joy-filled moments, and always reminding us of God’s presence and God’s love. “Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? . . . I come to the end – I am still with you” (Psalm 139:7 & 18b).

The Church, as one of many faith communities, acknowledges Christ as its Head, and seeks to exhibit the servant role modeled by the Christ who makes us one. Christ sent out his disciples to heal the sick and spread the good news of the gospel. So, we, representing the Body of Christ to the World, are sent out to witness to the “old, old stories,” in new, ever exciting ways, modeling a living Christ to a world in need of the knowledge of their true Savior.

In our baptism we are called to die to ourselves and be raised with Christ for the work of salvation. Each time we participate in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, we renew that commitment to the work of Christ in the world. This I believe! And much more every day.

My Faith Journey  
Rev. Larry Graham-Johnson, HR

Having been raised on a small farm in the pine tree state of Maine, I was exposed to nature in many different scenarios. The tiny town of Wales had little of the amenities of the larger towns and cities in the center part of that state. The educational system was adequate for that culture but was not open to the wider country or world.

My religious education began on Sunday mornings as my mother espoused the “sins” of the community in which we lived and expanded to the corruption of the state, The nation, and the world. Most of this information came from the very conservative local newspaper and her background of Puritanism there in New England.

In the early 1950’s United Presbyterians came to Maine as the Mission at the Eastward. Eleven dormant churches were supplied with pastors including the church in Wales. We shared one pastor with two other churches. I became a charter member at the age of twelve and began to receive a different message about God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Up until this time, God’s presence was exhibited in the thunderstorms, blizzards, accidents, and deaths.

Married to a former classmate in 1963, I was picked up by the draft two years later. Vietnam was the news highlight, so to circumvent the Army, I enlisted in the Navy. I was sent for a yearlong electronics school in Great Lakes, Illinois. Thus began my engagement with the country and the world. After eleven years in the Navy, including a year off the coast of Vietnam, I opted out of military service and began to renew my education.

However, I was left with many unanswered questions, about life, God, and the place of the church in a violent world. Although not directly exposed to the warfare, I was made acutely aware of what I have come to call the “underbelly” of war. Small towns and cities in and near the war zone suffered tremendously from the military actions. Land is destroyed, villages are wiped out, women, children and the elderly are used, abused, and killed by the military forces in ways which seem inconceivably to those far removed from the fighting.

On my return, I attended an adult education class at Palms Presbyterian Church where I also served as an Elder on Session. I posed this question to the class, “Where is God in all the violent parts of the world?”

Mary Baine Rudolf was the Christen Education Director at the church and was teaching the class. She told the story of a small Austrian village during World War II. There was an encampment of German soldiers close by and they often stole food and other supplies from the villagers. One night several men from the village raided the camp to get food for their families. Unfortunately, several soldiers were killed in the raid.

The following morning all the villagers were called together and asked to identify the raiders. When no answers were forth coming, all the males were lined up and hanged in front of the community. One young boy, because of his small size, hung there struggling for some time. One of the soldiers called out, “Where is your God now?” The answer from one of the villagers was this, “Hanging at the end of your rope!”

Suddenly, I was aware of a very different image of the God in which I had been brought up to believe. A suffering God who experienced death on a cross (human capital punishment), to defeat death, once for all.

What followed was a time of trying to determine purpose in my life. We adopted two boys: Tim and Jeremy. I earned an Associate Degree in Xray Engineering here in Florida. Operated a Medical Specialties business for more than a decade and seemed to be settling into life as a member of the community. In what seemed a miracle, we were blessed with two more boys by natural birth: Matthew and Nathan.

However, settled was not to be our purpose. We were divorced, which brought extreme unsettledness. My connection with the church was diminished. My work became unsatisfactory. I no longer had what I had thought was a solid family relationship. There was a distinct feeling of homelessness and hopelessness.

The Presbyterian Church in downtown Springfield became a rock for me at the time. Revs Ann and Bill Robinson were my support and friends. I was invited to a community sing-a-long on a Sunday afternoon just before Christmas. The Rev. Ann Graham was also invited, and we made a connection. I had been present when Ann had been accepted into the Presbytery and had been impressed with her statements of Faith. We have now been married for nearly 30 years.

During Hurricane Andrew Recovery, I was asked by the Rev. Sally Campbell-Evans to supervise the Presbyterian Recovery effort in Homestead and South Miami. It was during that time that I became aware of the needs of those impacted by the storm, not just for a new home but also a recovery of their lives. I did not feel I was qualified for the pastoral work and rebuilding homes at the same time. I began the process of earning a Bachelor of Liberal Studies Degree at Barry University in Miami. An ecumenical rebuilding effort was instituted to complete hurricane recovery and engage the affordable housing situation in Miami Dade. I was asked to work with the community in building the process to proceed in that work.

Feeling the call to at least study pastoral care in some form, Ann and I traveled to Chicago so that I could attend McCormick Theological Seminary to earn an MDiv. All during this time I was exposed to many different sources of study and religious thought. From Eastern European doctrine to Latin American Liberation Theology. In addition, I studied African American theology and Korean religious perspective. I assisted students from eight different countries and cultures with their writing and speaking needed for their class work. I have found the Apostle Paul's writing in Ephesians to be especially appropriate, "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of you calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all." (4:4-5 NRSV)

During my ministry I have served a variety of congregations, mostly in interim situations in Ohio, North Carolina, Florida (plus hurricane recovery), Arizona and New Mexico. Small churches in the range of a dozen members to one of 2,400 member and four services on Sunday. One thing they all had in common was the great diversity in backgrounds and faith experiences. Eugene Patterson reminded me in his book, *Contemplative Pastor*, that before I arrive God is

already in that place to which I am called. My task is to love the people and discover where God is a work in their lives.

While living in Santa Fe, NM I studied and was certified as an ESL tutor. I worked with many students who were already working in the community and/or seeking better jobs and lives.

Serving in New Mexico, in mostly a Spanish based culture has been a satisfying and healing experience. Learning new ways of being and new ways of presenting the gospel of Christ is both challenging and growth experiencing. I hope that there is still some work, some purpose in retirement that will be enlightening for me and for those I might serve.