

MEET PTS



As a little girl, M.Div. student Jillian Jones always wanted to grow up to be like her mother, a United Methodist Church lay speaker. “In Methodist-speak, that basically means ‘substitute pastor,’ so I always saw my mom as a pastor,” Jillian says. Even before she could read and write properly, Jillian would “write” and then “read” sermons to her stuffed animals. “My sermons were always based on John 3:16—the only verse I knew at the time,” she notes.

By the time it came to attend college, however, Jillian questioned whether that childhood dream was still real for her. She thought she wanted to be a genetic researcher instead, so she began pursuing a degree in bioinformatics. “I quickly discovered that, though I loved learning about science, I didn’t love doing science in the laboratory,” she reflects. “I started wondering what I should do with my life.”

As Jillian voiced her quest for discernment, several people told her she should become a pastor. So she accepted an offer by her own pastor—PTS alumnus the Rev. Brett Dinger—to do a summer internship at the church. “Everything I did in ministry that summer was something I loved doing—and wanted to do for the rest of my life,” says Jillian. She started applying to seminaries, and, wanting to stay in her home state of Pennsylvania, she chose PTS—the only UMC-approved seminary in Pennsylvania.

“In the fall of 2015, after having just graduated from college, I got married on a Friday and started classes the following Monday!” Jillian says. It was then that she started realizing something amiss with her hearing. “My husband would be talking to me while he stood right behind me, and I couldn’t hear him,” she recalls. Taking the problem very seriously, he encouraged Jillian to see a doctor. She failed a hearing test and that December, at age 21, was diagnosed with Ménière’s disease. “My prognosis is that I will be totally deaf by the time I’m 30,” Jillian says. “Medications are slowing the progress of the disease, but it’s not a matter of ‘if’ but ‘when’ I will go deaf.”

After Jillian took time to grieve the certain outcome, she started wondering what she’d do now. “I questioned how I could be a pastor if I couldn’t hear my congregants. Then I had a ‘God-moment.’ I got a magazine in the mail—one I didn’t even subscribe to—and on the cover was a story about a United Methodist pastor who was deaf,” she recalls. So she started learning American Sign Language (ASL). “Through my classes, I discovered how the church has failed the D/deaf community, which is by far the most unreached disability group. It’s that way because interacting with D/deaf people is not a ‘one-and-done’ thing. You can’t just build an accessibility ramp or put up signs or offer books in Braille to reach people. With the D/deaf community, you either have to learn a new language or pay an interpreter. That gets expensive and takes a long-term commitment,” Jillian notes.

So she got passionate about filling that void. When her seminary field education requirement came up, she knew she wanted to work in a church’s ministry to the D/deaf—and that opportunity came thanks to Hot Metal Bridge Faith Community pastors Jeff Eddings and Mike Holohan—both PTS alums. That field ed experience led Jillian to stay at Hot Metal, where for the D/deaf community she does pastoral care, makes lots of hospital visits, has taught a beginner ASL class, and conducts bi-weekly silent, signing-only game nights. “For Jeff and Mike, pastoral care requires an interpreter, and the presence of that person creates a boundary. I can do the pastoral care without that boundary,” says Jillian. “And our silent game nights have brought together a great mix of people, from youths and adults—ASL students (especially from the University of Pittsburgh and the Community College of Allegheny County), people with no knowledge at all of ASL but who pick it up organically while there, and people in the D/deaf community. Since the point is to communicate—to ‘talk’ with each other—silent game night builds relationships in a way it can’t be done in a classroom.”

Jillian has turned her coming deafness into an opportunity for ministry to a much-neglected community. Her current year at Hot Metal serves as one of her internships for her **Church Planting Emphasis in the Seminary’s M.Div. program**, and her UMC bishop has planned with Jillian that after she graduates she will be planting ministries to the D/deaf in already-established churches. “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28). Praise the Lord. And go Jillian!

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