

MEET PTS



# CREATOR OF RUFFLED BY GRACE MICHELLE WAHILA '05 IS BLESSING COUPLES IN PARIS

After graduating from PTS with her M.Div., being ordained in the PC(USA), and serving as associate pastor at Third Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh for seven years, former PTS Board member the Rev. Michelle Wahila '05 sensed a far-away call—one to The American Church in Paris, France! Responding to that call, Michelle and her family packed up and moved to Paris, where she began to fill many and varied pastoral responsibilities in 2012. Her work included advocating for robust children's and family ministries.

"We must do the 'everyday work' of loving each other—with open hearts, generous spirits, and plenty of forgiveness."

"Loving my people is absolutely the most important 'work' of my life," says Michelle. She continues, "In seminary, my professors spent plenty of time exploring the concept of prioritizing call. The demands of serving the church are high. Often, even if pastors are excellent at setting boundaries for Sabbath rest and time with family, work creeps in for myriad reasons. It's easy . . . until it's not."

So after three years of fulfilling, busy ministry at ACP, Michelle decided to take a "small break" to be with her boys—husband Kevin, and young sons Connor and Marcello. "The 'work' of being a family is about planting love every single day. It is about planting generosity, forgiveness, patience, and hope each day, because what we sow into our families will bloom into our tomorrows," she notes.

After that break, Michelle "stepped back into ministry in a sort of 'entrepreneurial' role"—that of blessing couples being married in Paris. As the creator and owner of Ruffled by Grace, Michelle says she is "so pleased to be working with a variety of professionals in the wedding industry to be an alternative to a secular celebrant. It is truly an amazing ministry opportunity" that also allows Michelle to connect couples up with local churches in their hometowns.

One aspect of this ministry that Michelle likes to focus on consists in blessing couples who have "walked away from the church" but feel called to make their marriage a sacred and holy moment. "I bless a lot of couples who describe themselves as 'not religious,'" she says. "It's always interesting to see how these couples are still drawn to liturgical language, to blessing the 'sacred moment.' There is something indescribable and intangible there—a deep desire to experience grace and blessing as one takes a leap of faith into life together and into marriage." In those "liminal spaces," as Michelle calls them, she feels honored and privileged to speak gospel words into the beginning of a couple's life together. "I would never have had this opportunity if I had stayed in a traditional pastoral role," she notes—so Pastor Michelle considers herself a "seed planter."

The importance Michelle places on families also led her to begin offering creative, fun "Family Promise" ceremonies. "So much of being a family is about planting," she notes. "As Audrey Hepburn once said, 'To plant a garden is to believe in tomorrow.' So I help people plant love into their families through these personalized ceremonies—and plant memories for a lifetime."

"In those moments when it feels like everything is 'falling apart,' it is absolutely necessary to come back to our center," says Michelle. "The One who loved us first is always there with open arms. We have to find our way back to the grace we have been given and have the courage to offer it freely into our families—even when we don't really feel like offering it. We must do the 'everyday work' of loving each other—with open hearts, generous spirits, and plenty of forgiveness."

So if you find yourself in Paris in the springtime—or any other time—you just might see the Rev. Michelle, Ruffled by Grace, blessing a marriage under the Eiffel Tower, jogging with her boys along the banks of the Seine, or leading a Family Promise ceremony in the Tuileries Gardens. Or who knows? You could even be that family . . . .

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