

Billie Watts and Kerry Kirtley

September 25, 2020 49:46

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

COVID-19, co-pastors, religious leaders, Boerne, Texas, ministry, justice, Methodist church, diversity and inclusivity, seminary, progressive, LGBTQ, Travis Park, Children, Touchstone Community Church, PFLAG, United Church of Christ

SPEAKERS

Kerry Kirtley, Mary Wilson, Billie Watts

- M** Mary Wilson 00:02
Hi, my name is Mary Wilson. I am interviewing Billie Watts and Kerry Kirtley on September 25th, 2020. Yes, I have it right here. Billie and Kerry, let me have you introduce the church where you pastor. If you would, maybe give us some background on how the two of you came to be co-pastors at this church?
- B** Billie Watts 00:32
Kerry and I could probably say it in one voice because we have such similar backgrounds. Kerry, jump in as I talk, and I'm Billie. We were at a Methodist church together in Boerne as I was a member, leading women's ministry, and Kerry was children's director. I was not on staff, I was volunteer status and so, we knew each other and interacted, but not really closely.
- K** Kerry Kirtley 01:05
We did not know each other that well because my time was mostly with children on Sundays and hers was mostly with women on Wednesday.
- M** Mary Wilson 01:13
Right, right.



Billie Watts 01:14

Then I left. My husband was transferred to Dallas with AT&T from San Antonio and I went to seminary. That was a dream of mine. I graduated in 2013 and oddly enough, was appointed back to First Methodist Boerne. Now, Kerry, tell where you had gone in the meantime.



Mary Wilson 01:37

Was that at Perkins?



Billie Watts 01:38

From Perkins, yes. So, Kerry?



Kerry Kirtley 01:42

I had originally answered a call way back in 1997. I went to seminary in Austin for one semester, but I had five children at the time, and I realized that was probably not the right time. I postponed it and then fast forward 20 years, and I'm working at Boerne church. I still think, "Will I ever get to seminary again? I don't know." I did end up in seminary at Perkins. I started in 2015 and right as Billie was finishing up, I think, around that time.



Billie Watts 02:24

I finished in 2013.



Kerry Kirtley 02:26

Yes, and I left Boerne church. A few months [later], I knew she was coming, but I left the church work there because I was doing other things. Anyhow, I then ended up back in San Antonio for my internship. Well, we skipped a part, but Billie was then working at Travis Park United Methodist Church and I did my internship at Travis Park United Methodist Church.



Mary Wilson 02:54

So at some point, Billie, you went from the church in Boerne to Travis Park?

B

Billie Watts 02:59

Yes. That's a whole story in and of itself. Three years as associate in Boerne, speaking a message of loving inclusiveness and getting a little push back at the end along the way.

K

Kerry Kirtley 03:19

One of the reasons why I left the ministry in Boerne was I knew, one of the reasons was, I knew I was really called to start a PFLAG [Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays] in Boerne, and I knew Billie had talked about that as well. In the interim, between working in Boerne and going to seminary, is when we started a PFLAG in Boerne. I knew I probably couldn't keep my job as children's ministry director and do that.

B

Billie Watts 03:49

It was really interesting. I remember the conversation and Kerry probably does too. We're talking on the phone and I said, "When I come back, I really want to start a PFLAG." Because as a parent of two gay sons, when my oldest son was not even coming out, but I knew and I had nowhere to go and nobody to talk to. I had to go to San Antonio, and knowing there were other parents like me that needed a place to go and talk and learn. Kerry and I are talking now, "I want to start PFLAG in Boerne." Kerry says, "Well, I want to start PFLAG in Boerne." Luckily, there was a Sunday school class, a progressive Sunday school class, in Boerne that wanted to be part of that. It evolved and we actually were able to have our meetings at the church. All hell broke loose and we ended up leasing the space, so to speak, so that the church wasn't allowing it. They weren't paying for our air to breathe. We took that burden away from them and we couldn't use the address of the church, but we could meet there in an off building. That was the beginning of a lot of the turmoil.

M

Mary Wilson 05:10

How did that feel to you, personally? Because you both had great connections and deep roots in that congregations, so what was that like on a personal level?

K

Kerry Kirtley 05:22

Painful. It was so painful first to have to make the choice to leave some of the families that I had raised, helped raise their children, and because I knew the bigger picture wouldn't fare well. It was just painful to be there and to see folks that I love not necessarily against us,

but not getting it, not standing alongside us, like I thought they might. It was very alienating and I know Billie experienced some of this. To me, the day I realized how deep it ran, was going to a coffee shop with two of my children on one of their birthdays. This older couple, who would have done anything for me and children's ministry - every Sunday morning we talked at coffee hour. When I walked in and saw them, I hadn't seen them in a while. I walked up to the table where they were sitting and both of them put their heads down and wouldn't even look at me. I thought, "This isn't really happening." And so, I went and sat down with my kids and they were like, "Mom, what happened over there?" I said, "I'm not sure." When I left, I got up and went back to the table to say goodbye. Same thing, table got silent and their heads dropped. I thought, "Wow, this really happened." I mean, and I experienced a lot of people just kind of walk in the other way, people who normally wouldn't do that. It was very, very painful. I thought, "where is the love of God in this?" Where is it? It blew me away.

B

Billie Watts 07:07

Mine was being on staff. Of course, part of my responsibility was preaching occasionally, and I had a deep relationship with the people. I actually think I was brought back to Boerne, and this is the pastor saying this, and let me be clear, he said, "You can say things I can't," because of the relationship I had with the people. There was no secret among anybody where I stood, not from the bishop, not from the DS [District Superintendent], not from the pastor. Yet, at the end of the day, I had to take the heat for it. I'm going to tell you, it broke my heart. They broke my heart. Luckily, I think we left on a good note, most of them never knew how badly they broke my heart. People had left the church and were quite vocal sometimes about why. I was, then of course, in the Methodist system, you're appointed to another church. Through some conversations, I was appointed then to Travis Park, which is what they call a reconciling church, the Methodist Church, which is where I said from the beginning, "Appoint me there." This is where - inner city church, this is where I'm made for it. Anyway, so I landed there for a year, then they had a change there too, the pastor retired. Somebody else came in just as Kerry was coming on to be an intern. I felt like with a new pastor coming on, again, the scale tipped to where I didn't think that I was going to be as used there as maybe my passion was calling.

B

Billie Watts 08:44

This was in 2017. I'd been there one year, ordained in 2016 and was at Travis Park, for about one year, at Boerne for three years. I'm getting too long in this story, but in the interim, as Kerry is at Travis Park as intern, the United Methodist Church is going

through what - as a denomination determining where they're going to stay in, Kerry and I knew, she was in process to be a deacon. We both knew that there was a line in the sand and we went in saying I would fight. I would fight for inclusion. I knew this was my final battle. Then in February of 2000 and - what was it, '18, they made their decision and I said, "I'm out, I'm out." I thought Travis Park would remove themselves from the Methodist church, would disassociate. They took the Methodist name off, but they still haven't disassociated. That was my only hope that they would, and they didn't, and I left. Now, Kerry and I had already talked to Sid Hall that summer before about what it would take to become UCC. And so, that conversation was in the works in the back of our mind. Then at that moment, we contacted the people we needed to hear. Kerry, you want to talk about withdrawing from?

M Mary Wilson 08:44
What year was this?

K Kerry Kirtley 09:42
Actually, when we went to talk to Sid Hall, it was 2019 when UMC made their horrible decision.

B Billie Watts 10:37
Okay, not '18.

K Kerry Kirtley 10:46
Who knows time anymore, right [laugh]?

M Mary Wilson 10:52
Yesterday was Friday, all day, and I couldn't figure out why it wasn't on everybody's calendar.

K Kerry Kirtley 11:00
When we went to talk to Sid, we both had this [dream of] being at Travis park with the openness of Travis Park, the reconciling nature of Travis Park. We kind of had this dream of possibly being a combo church and somehow being an extension ministry of say, Travis Park UMC in northwest San Antonio. Anyway, that fell through in 2019, but we'd already

talked to Sid about the UCC. It was after February of 2019 when I decided to leave the UMC. I had already suspected that was probably going to happen because I knew I didn't have forever to serve. I'm 55, I didn't want the rest of my life to be fighting the UMC. I knew something something had to happen now. I had already looked into the UCC and visited in the fall before that, UCC in San Antonio, and already was in discernment about that. I did leave UCC then and we both went through their process. I was a member in discernment, actually, officially still am. I was approved for ordination, but because of COVID, we haven't actually done the ordination.

M Mary Wilson 12:29
Heart of Texas Association?

K Kerry Kirtley 12:31
Yeah, yeah.

B Billie Watts 12:33
I was transferring my credentials. I wanted to leave the UMC and I was told it's easier to transfer your credentials. So, I didn't officially. I was on personal leave. Then the Sunday that I was approved for ordination, or they transferred my credentials, is the day that then I wrote my letter following that to officially withdraw from the UMC. I want to say too, before I even went to Travis Park, I asked, "Can't we start through the Methodist Church and a reconciling church in our area?" I was told no, that was not going to happen. Kerry and I both, I knew for a long time we dreamed of starting such a church in Boerne. We knew there was a need. That's why on that first Sunday, after our pride walk, the second pride walk, when 75 people showed up, we knew there was no going back. That our inclination, that urging we had was valid, and we were moving forward. In the UCC, where we faced not only because of our sex, but because of our age, and our stance on inclusiveness, the Methodist Church really didn't have a real place for us. And we walk into the UCC and we are validated, we are encouraged. We are said, "Go do it. We'll figure it out. We said the time is now, it's hot. The time is now." They said, "Do it."

K Kerry Kirtley 14:09
There was so much freedom when that happened. I was like, "What? Why did we wait?" I mean, perhaps we waited to know the difference. I mean, I don't want to deny any of my experiences because I saw what was and what still is for so many people, and I also got

to experience what can be and it was amazing.

M

Mary Wilson 14:30

Yeah, I heard Sid expressed some similar things. I've known him well over 25 years, I think.

B

Billie Watts 14:40

Sid is like our hero because Sid took a stance long before it was even very discussed and we just have the greatest respect for him. The turning point for me was watching - this is so silly, in a way - that there was a documentary about Michael Jackson. If you've seen that, I think it's called *Neverland* or something like that.

M

Mary Wilson 15:09

I think I know what you're talking about.

B

Billie Watts 15:11

I was watching that and the victims, at the end of the thing, spoiler alert, at the end of it, they talk about that Michael Jackson was a very, he was a generous, loving man and he was a pedophile. They were both true and the problem was, people kept holding on to this in spite of the fact that he was a pedophile. I realized in that moment, for me, I idolized the Methodist Church, seeking their approval, of fighting in a system that really had no place for us. I knew then, I could let it go. I remember the last time, in one final meeting at Travis Park, I heard an answer. It was similar to what you experienced the day you were preaching. I was just sitting in a meeting and I heard this statement. I said, "that's it," so I quietly got up and left. I'd already taken an official leave, but I flung the doors open as I walked out there. I was like, "I am leaving this behind me." I want to say that it has been our privilege to be able to start Touchstone in Boerne, in the congregation, and the people that have come forth that have validated the need for this in our community. The commonality between us, people would say - Lynette Ross, who you probably also know. Lynette came and spoke to our congregation last fall, and we were having lunch with her, and there's always that conversation about, well, are people just going to say that we're the gay church? Kerry and I said from the beginning, "we're not just the gay church, but if we don't have gay people in our church, we have failed because we are the only place in Boerne for that to happen openly."

- M** Mary Wilson 17:09
So interesting. Just from my congregation being there 18 years, we never were anything but predominantly heterosexual couples, families and so on. Yes, we had gay families and couples with children, and so on, and mixes and so on, but it was never predominantly that. I think I remember one service when I looked around, it's like, oh, I think there are majority of gay people here tonight.
- B** Billie Watts 17:38
Well, we're not a majority.
- M** Mary Wilson 17:39
One time in 18 years.
- B** Billie Watts 17:41
Exactly. Lynette even said, I don't even, she really put that in perspective for us. She's like, "You know you have a church that's really good with youth and they don't say that's the church for youth." This particular ministry, we don't identify just by one thing. We worked really hard on our mission and vision statement. You may or may not know this, that we found out last September, a week before a grant was due, the CASA grant, that there was such a grant that we can apply for. Kerry and I spent a week, oh, I don't think we came up for air.
- M** Mary Wilson 18:22
I'm sure you didn't.
- B** Billie Watts 18:23
It's a complicated process.
- K** Kerry Kirtley 18:25
Very complicated. I thought, "We're not going to finish. We're not going to finish. Yes we are."

B Billie Watts 18:30
We didn't even think we had a chance. But you know, what? About what was it Kerry? November, I guess - no later, probably January. Wasn't that long cause we got the [unintelligible audio]

K Kerry Kirtley 18:42
It was in November when we found [out].

B Billie Watts 18:43
I guess it was November, we got the letter that we'd been approved. It was one of those moments where you knew you'd stepped out in faith and hope. And not only now has the our association, the Heart of Texas Association, seen the value and the need for what we were doing, but on the national level. We received a \$40,000 matching grant.

M Mary Wilson 19:11
That's wonderful.

B Billie Watts 19:13
It was surreal. You can see how grateful and indebted we are to the United Church of Christ for being willing to have a presence in our area. Dr. Longbottom even said they've been wanting a presence in this area for a while. In that moment everything just came together.

M Mary Wilson 19:38
I have so many questions in my head right now. Let me start by going back earlier in your lives. One of the questions I'm actually asking everyone that I interview is, do you have some formative experiences that you would identify, that have shaped you as a minister and your approach to ministry and that have brought you to where you are today?

K Kerry Kirtley 20:06
You want me to go?

M Mary Wilson 20:08
Go ahead, Kerry.

K Kerry Kirtley 20:09
I would say yes to that. Oddly enough, I was baptized in the Catholic Church, but when my family got divorced when I was like five or six, of course, they were kicked out of the church, and I didn't grow up in a church. My memory of church people was one of exclusion. [If] you don't play the game right, you're out. If you don't act right, you're out. If you don't know the right things, you're out. All growing up, if I went on a retreat with a friend, it was just, I was excluded. That greatly impacted [me].

M Mary Wilson 20:53
Yeah.

K Kerry Kirtley 20:54
When I went into ministry, even as a children's ministry director, I so badly wanted those children to first and foremost, before they felt the need to memorize any scripture, before they could read, to know that they were valued and loved as children of God and that they were of sacred worth and that they had meaning and purpose.

M Mary Wilson 21:11
Okay. How did you get into children's ministry from that church at all?

K Kerry Kirtley 21:18
There was a huge gap, but I went to my husband, I met my husband and he was a preacher's kid. When my kids were young, my oldest, I have seven, when my two oldest kids were young, we started going to a Disciples of Christ Church in San Antonio where his dad had preached.

M Mary Wilson 21:36
Okay.

K

Kerry Kirtley 21:37

In my mind, I had always had a relationship with God. I knew that, but my mind was just, I was a sponge at that point. I started helping out with things, didn't know anything, but I was helping out with things for years, and then finally ended up moving to Boerne. That was 10-15 years later, whatever it was, and found my way at Boerne church and started helping in children's ministry because I had been leading - starting and leading parents' day outs at that other church and nursery work and all this other [stuff]. A position became available and I had already been involved in it. I thought, "Well, what the heck?" That's how I got in that way. It was a progression from nothing in a period of 10 or 15 years. From really not a whole lot of anything except a strong relationship and love for God that led into children's ministry and the desire for children to begin their life knowing how valuable and sacred they were just as they are. That was kind of the root of it.

M

Mary Wilson 22:55

Which is so important, it's so important. Billie, how did you find your way?

B

Billie Watts 23:02

I grew up mostly not with a church-going family, but taken to church and dropped off often, mostly the Baptist Church. So you know what kind of theology I was taught. I wouldn't say I had a love of God, I would say I had a fear of God. God was judgmental, and it was all conditional.

M

Mary Wilson 23:27

Where did you grow up?

B

Billie Watts 23:30

In Dallas. I will say, [I] left Dallas, moved to Boerne for my husband's job. At that time, I had four children. My gay son is number two child and I would have told you he was gay since he was three. But I had a theology that didn't match that. I tell my son all the time that he made me a better person because I had to grapple with some things as he got older. There was no place - that's what drove me to PFLAG and into intense study. How can I reconcile love of God and love of son? Little did I know, I began to see the pieces. My youngest son then, I thought, I've seen this before. I think I know where we're going here. I actually went to a Unitarian Church in San Antonio for a seminar, what does the Bible really say about homosexuality? That was a life changing moment for me.

I can't even tell you really what the speaker said, but I listened to the people speaking, the parents, the congregation, and I've never felt that kind of love for people before. I got a very, very clear message. Probably one of two in my life on the drive home. It was: "Love your son." I've got it. Just love your son. I say that was my most liberating moment. I didn't have to change him, I didn't have to defend God, I was free to love.

B

Billie Watts 25:18

Then, soon after my husband was transferred, the company left and moved to Dallas. I thought, "This is my chance to go to seminary." I've been doing women's ministry because of so many struggles with my son, because of a bout with depression after leaving my home in Dallas for so many years, coming to a new city. I was 40 years old, I had lost myself along the way. I started going to a study at the Baptist Church, Beth Moore studies, by the way. I became a very big Beth Moore fan. Now, I would take issue with almost everything she has to say today, but I learned there a way to study scripture in more depth. That helped me then make a transition when I had the chance to go to seminary. I already knew there was a bigger picture of God, I knew what I knew. I knew there was a whole lot I didn't know. I wanted to go learn it and I couldn't find anybody down here that was going to tell me. That's why I went to seminary, never believing in a million years that I would end up where I am today, but just wanting to learn. Like Kerry described, being a sponge. What I found there was that what I thought was true, that God was much bigger and had much more love that I had never been taught. I vowed at that time that I would never let a family sit in a pew never hearing those words. No matter what, I was going to devote myself, that was my passion. Anyway, that's kind of what under-girded it all. It's been a journey and I understand the people that are stuck where they are, but I believe I was stuck in a bad theology because nobody would speak it. We know why people don't speak it because they're afraid people are going to leave or take issue and take their money. We know that. I was in a very unique position. I own this, that I had a privilege to be able to speak that without - it wasn't my livelihood. I wasn't gonna starve. My husband made the biggest living, so that freed me. It also makes you a little less controllable, I think in some ways, because you're not afraid to say things. Come what may, that was the decision that I made.

M

Mary Wilson 27:55

Yeah, so it's interesting, I'm hearing from both of you that you've both had, for different reasons, and actually, I guess, some overlapping reasons, some very painful experiences in church. Yet, here you are ministers trying to offer maybe a different experience to

others. How is that working during the pandemic? What are you all doing? And what have you done during the last few months as this pandemic has hit, and there's been various levels of closures and openings and so on? What has Touchtone been doing?

B

Billie Watts 28:29

Go ahead, Kerry.

K

Kerry Kirtley 28:33

Actually, I feel so blessed in many ways. For one, we weren't tied down to a building. We were renting, we were renting a space. The space itself had to close because it was like a community hall attached to a retirement center and a lot of retirees would come for lunch and dinner in this place. They had to close. That was not something that had to be a concern of ours. We also have a wonderful community that understands COVID like we understand COVID and appreciates that we care for them, and that we should care for each other in this process. I will say I'm also very happy that although we can't meet face to face in person, we have managed to keep a lot of our connection going by having worship like this, face to face. We don't record ahead of time. I know that works for so many people, but for us, we just we come like this, we visit, we share, and then, we move on. We get to at least see each other and we have some small groups with that as well. I feel fortunate in so many ways, it was frustrating, of course, having just gotten started.

M

Mary Wilson 30:05

Right.

B

Billie Watts 30:08

I think we met, we started week to week in December. We'd actually met face to face 14 times. Now we meet in the fall every other week and we meet in the summer once a month. We built up to weekly, but we had only met 14 times for 14 weeks when the pandemic hit.

M

Mary Wilson 30:20

It seems like to me that you all have had unique challenges compared to congregations that maybe [have] been established and around for a long time. How do you feel things are going?

B

Billie Watts 30:44

Yes, we've had the technology challenges. It's hit and miss every week, but I tell you, I think we were in a unique position to do new, different things. We weren't set in a kind of mindset of, "we've always done it this way."

K

Kerry Kirtley 31:05

We didn't have any of that.

B

Billie Watts 31:06

We were really liberated and doing this, like we're doing today, now people see your name and your face instead of just popping in and out on the Sunday and glimpsing each other, we're looking at each other every Sunday. I think it's been a great connector. We tried to gather some shepherding groups to try to keep up with people. Some are doing a better job with that than others, but Kerry and I don't let too much time go by before we reach out to somebody that hasn't shown up in a while. And it's easier because we average what, Kerry, you think 60 - 55 a Sunday?

K

Kerry Kirtley 31:46

We average about 50 to 55 every Sunday. We have roll call, so we can actually check off the people and see. I would say in a month's time we see about probably 70 people.

M

Mary Wilson 32:00

Right. Yeah, that's interesting. For me, we made a decision in the middle of one week that we can't meet this Sunday. We were trying to follow some of the UCC guidelines that have come down and so forth. We switched, and we've been doing a Facebook Live Stream. We switched to just that, then we got the zoom feature. We're doing both and the church has continued to do that. I saw people coming to the Facebook Live stream that had not been in the church building for months. I thought, "Well, this is interesting." I felt like people were searching for connections, and maybe returning to ones that felt familiar. I don't want to impose that because I haven't actually asked anyone directly if that's what was behind their participation on the Facebook page. Have you all found that you have people looking for connections?

B

Billie Watts 33:03

Definitely. We've had Dallas people join us regularly now and friends of friends, friends of our members that live elsewhere, they come on. We hope that when we do go face to face, our plan is to keep this up as well. Because while there are opportunities where they live, to experience it in person themselves, certainly we'll let them know the places we know that, but it's broadened our field so much. We miss the people, the synergy and all that. That's a challenge, I think, to keep things fresh and energetic and more people want to engage with it instead of just - we haven't lost any enthusiasm along the way. I will say that. I just don't think we have.

K

Kerry Kirtley 33:56

I think that there are people who are like, "are we going to get back together again?" We don't see that kind of gathering in the near future right now, especially as numbers are rising again in Texas. The minute we say - and I've said this to several people in the last couple of weeks - "Remember if we're saying if you're 65 or older, we prefer you not come, then we're not opening our doors because that is exclusionary." That's exclusionary. Now ultimately, we're going to have to say it's up to you, but we feel like things are at such a point where we can clean, we can do this, we can whatever, and make it happen as safely as possible. If we're gonna do it, because we've seen that happen, if you're 65 or older, if you have vulnerable people, or if you - then don't come. I'm like, well then it's the Church of the privileged, whoever's healthy and young.

M

Mary Wilson 34:59

Well, right.

K

Kerry Kirtley 35:00

How do you do that, if you know you might be able to wait a little bit longer and provide a safer place for everybody? I don't know. I mean, it's a question. To me, it feels at this point, if we know the numbers are high, and we know, it's not where we had originally said it should be, that we're just not patient enough, and we want to get together. I don't want to.

B

Billie Watts 35:30

Or bow to peer pressure because there's a lot, I guarantee you, almost every other church in Boerne is meeting face to face again as our numbers start climbing back up. We just took a wait and see attitude.

M

Mary Wilson 35:42

Yeah. Once again, you're doing the counter cultural thing. Okay, I actually want to back up to something that I was thinking about earlier, and there just didn't seem to be a good time to jump in and ask, but you've talked about your families and your children, and along the way, and some of the influences they have had on you. How do your children feel about you as pastors now? What kind of conversations have you had about that?

B

Billie Watts 36:16

Kerry?

K

Kerry Kirtley 36:19

I noticed a long time ago, before I even did this, that most of my pastor friends and pastor people, their kids weren't in the church anymore and I wondered why. As a children's ministry director, I kind of saw why families and children - saw what happens in the church, the ugly side of church. It was quite a turn off. My kids were subject to the same kind of ugly internal stuff at church. However, my kids are very glad to know that there are people like Billie, and people like me - the church is going to continue. The body of Christ is going to continue. If there aren't people there sharing the good news as we understand it to be, what will happen? They're pleased. Some of them will pop in on what we're doing, but they're also in their 20s and exploring their lives as 20 year olds will. They are very grateful that there are churches now that are countering what they experienced growing up.

B

Billie Watts 37:39

I have a daughter with three young children and two of my children showed up [to] our first Sunday together. They haven't been back, but that's life for them. My two gay sons don't really want anything to do with the church just because of the way the church can be. But I will say, even though they don't come, and I think this is true of a lot of people in our area, even if they haven't come, they've expressed interest. My daughter does our accounting work, she's a CPA. So, that's great. She doesn't have access to our money, but she does manage to make sure we're not being stupid. That's a gift to us. And she does it because she believes in what we say, and I believe, even though my kids aren't coming, I think they're really proud. I think sometimes there's resentment because it keeps us busy from some things. We have to make choices sometimes, but yeah, I think they're proud. I think there's people that would say my church is Touchstone, even when they're not at Touchstone. I really do.

M

Mary Wilson 39:01

Certainly had plenty of people that said Church of the Savior was their church and I would hear that and be occasionally surprised. Okay, well, if you're claiming this church, then yay. Yeah, but it didn't always translate into any kind of regular attendance or, I mean, the participation would be in different ways than coming to Sunday.

K

Kerry Kirtley 39:32

But it does translate into them telling other people.

M

Mary Wilson 39:36

It does.

B

Billie Watts 39:37

It does.

K

Kerry Kirtley 39:38

There's power in that.

B

Billie Watts 39:40

We are in a very unique position. While we don't endorse any political candidates, we can have really cutting edge conversations. We say it's the gospel, which that is what I believe. Let's preach the gospel and see where it leads you in your politics. There's a book out, I don't know if you've seen, it's called *The Purple Zone* or something like that. *The Purple Zone, Preaching in the Purple Zone*, and it's for those congregations that you've got red and blue, and you're trying to find the middle. We're not in the purple zone. Kerry and I have said, we don't ask, but we know because we see what people show up to. There may be some whose other family members are in the - feel very differently politically, but there's just a little, there's a fine line between the gospel and politics. We know that Jesus was political, so we encourage engagement in politics. We lay out a godly perspective, we believe. Now, we know the other side would say they have a godly perspective too, but Kerry and I, we fall back on something I learned in seminary. I know Kerry believes this too, if your interpretation does not lead to justice, mercy, love, then you need to dig deeper because something's off. So that's our plumb line.

M

Mary Wilson 41:09

Yeah, yeah. Thank you. Well, we've covered a lot of territory here. I'm so appreciative of the ministry y'all have and what you're doing in Boerne, and I've seen a few pictures I think on Facebook where I recognize a face or two. I'm very happy to see those familiar faces in there and knowing that some folks have a new home. I'm just wondering, at this point, is there anything from your life stories that we haven't touched upon that are significant for this conversation, anything that I've left out or anything that you would like to add?

B

Billie Watts 41:57

Kerry can really attest to this as well. I grew up in Dallas, in Oak Cliff, I don't know if you know Oak Cliff, but [it's] a beautiful, wonderful place to live. Most people if you said, "I'm from Oak Cliff," they went, "Oh." I had everything I needed and most of what I wanted, I don't want to pretend otherwise.

M

Mary Wilson 42:18

Right.

B

Billie Watts 42:20

Living in the community and the - we were all pretty much, I don't want to say economically the same because even in my elementary school, I'm finding out there were a lot more differences than I was aware of at that time. We kind of stayed with the same group, all of us growing up, there wasn't a lot of transition back in those days. I think there's just something about growing up in Oak Cliff, which was kind of a humble place. It has its affluent area where, Stevens Park, where the doctors lived by the hospital and things like that. I was raised with the mantra, "Just because you can, doesn't mean you should." That's deeply impacted my life. It's caused tension in my life, when I've had more than I can even really justify. I live in that tension, but I think the tension is good. I think it was good being at Travis Park, doing my internship in Dallas, at Grace United Methodist at inner city reconciling church. It changes you. It gives you a heart for people. I would say, I think that has been the biggest thing. Even that I'd see just exemplified at Touchstone over and over and over is an openness of heart and a commitment to making life more equitable, and justice for all people. Of course, that's a UCC motto, and it's just such a great fit for us where we live. I know Kerry probably can speak to that a lot herself, so Kerry.

K

Kerry Kirtley 44:12

Listening to Billie's upbringing, I was raised with one of eight and then having seven children of my own, I feel like I experienced a lot of value in that. In that when you put that many people together in one space, you have to learn how to get along with people or you're miserable. I did have that experience. My kids did not have the same experience, I don't think, growing up in Boerne. I remember my children, on a couple of occasions, saying, "Are we poor?" Because we didn't live in the right neighborhood in Boerne and having seven children, they weren't going to get a brand new spanking car. They weren't going to get - it just wasn't going to happen. I remember telling them repeatedly, "Do we have everything we need? Food? Shelter? Yes. Do we have most of what we want, like Christmas and birthdays? Do you get things that you don't normally get? Yes." I said, "Do we have a little bit of our heart's desire?" We dream of going on a camping trip or a vacation, "Yes."

K

Kerry Kirtley 45:24

I said, "We are so far from poor that you can't even imagine, so no, we are not poor. You may not have a new car, but we are not poor." Living in this community, it was very difficult for them. Moving to the Methodist Church, Paul and I, we drove by two Sundays in a row, actually, before we joined because I thought, "I'm not going to that big white church." I meant building wise, it was a big white church and I had come from a smaller [one], but we drove past. I said, "I need to see how they're dressed. Let's see when they come out of church how they're dressed because I'm not buying shiny new shoes for seven kids, ain't no way." We drove past and we saw the first time - I can still remember the family. I won't give their name because they're a lovely family, but man, they were sharp, pressed and sharp. I thought, "Well, ain't gonna work. We'd be lucky if they have their shoes on their feet when we get here." Then we waited and we looked for other churches and then we came back another time. I said, "Let's drive through again." Then I saw, I don't know why, I saw it wasn't the pressed family, but it was something else. I thought, "Well, let's try it," and we did. We went in there and we were, of course, welcomed and received and loved, but it was very trying to fit into that community. It was only in the Methodist Church that I started even feeling like I wasn't enough, in seeing all of the - until I got to know people. It was a very difficult and hard learning experience for me and my family and what that looks like to be part of the community in that way. It impacted my ministry, it impacted when I went to Travis Park because no one should feel like they're not enough for whatever reason. In our church in Touchstone we call it "keeping it real." We just keep it real with each other and whatever our situation is, our life circumstance, our past. We feel free to share it and love that we are who we are because of it. I'm everything I am because of all of those experiences.

M

Mary Wilson 47:49

Well, right. Every place we've been has contributed to where we are now in one way or another.

B

Billie Watts 47:58

My son used to tell me, he's like, "If we just had a dog and a baby, we'd be rich." We got a dog and a baby, so he was right, we were rich.

M

Mary Wilson 48:15

A dog and a baby, oh my goodness [laughs].

B

Billie Watts 48:18

And all those things Kerry described in this heart thing we're talking about at Touchstone, and keeping it real, and asking hard questions, and having a progressive theology, which is in our mission statement - that we're open and affirming, theologically progressive. Jesus justice seeking church community of faith. We boldly embody the unconditional love, grace, and mission of Jesus in the world. If we can stick right there then we have a bright future. We also say that we are a place where all belong and all can become fully who God created them to be, and all are beloved. We focus on that.

K

Kerry Kirtley 49:04

That's what we focus on every week now.

M

Mary Wilson 49:07

That's great. Well, I'm going to stop the recording now, but I want to thank you all for spending your time with me this morning. This has been a wonderful conversation. I was looking forward to this so much, to be able to talk to both of you. And it is proven to be just fabulous. I'm going to stop the recording part.