

Hello St. Andrew United Methodist, I'm Pr. Darick Biondi! Some background on me, I consider myself an Appalachian Liberation Theologian serving the Triune God in the most incredible, and at times heartbreaking, places in all of God's creation – West Virginia. I am not a native of this great state, although I have lived my whole life in the Allegheny Plateau, with the exception of my time at Duke Divinity School, and want nothing more than to live out my years serving God in this incredible place we call home.

Now I was not always so smitten with the state of West Virginia. I moved from Pittsburgh to West Virginia in 1994 when Columbia Gas filed for bankruptcy and they closed my mom's office in Bethel Park, PA and moved her job to headquarters in Charleston, WV. The move went as well as it could, as we moved to South Charleston. We attended First Church South Charleston where I was confirmed and later married Pr. Cindy Briggs-Biondi on October 10th, 2010 in that very sanctuary. I attended Montrose Elementary, South Charleston Junior High, and South Charleston High School where I was active in music, theater, and student council, graduating in 2003. It was in my time at South Charleston High School that I vowed to leave West Virginia and NEVER return!

Several teachers shared the "leave West Virginia in order to succeed" mentality (one being particularly vocal about it), and that paired with missing what could have been in Pittsburgh led me looking elsewhere for college. I eventually settled on Wheeling Jesuit University due to a university scholarship as well as the Promise Scholarship, and driving in to Pittsburgh to have the fun city experiences like museums, events, and concerts.

I stayed in WV, but went as close to Pittsburgh as I possibly could with every intention of continuing this trend of leaving and not looking back. However, in my time at Wheeling Jesuit, I came to discover one of the incredible gifts of a college education in West Virginia is that I finally began to learn about the broken history of West Virginia. It was in reading *This Land Is Home to Me* (1975) and *At Home in the Web of Life* (1995) that opened my eyes and helped me realize that God was calling me to serve West Virginia, the place I vowed to leave!

So when I met Cindy in my first semester of seminary, I asked her if she ever considered West Virginia before, because that was where I was called to serve. In seminary I was introduced to other strands of liberation theology and really fell in love with Biblical Studies. I started as a licensed local minister, serving the youth and young adults at Christ Church Charleston from 2011-2013. I was commissioned as a provisional elder in 2013 and later ordained in 2016 – while serving Glasgow and Mt. Juliet United Methodist Churches. I

then served Mt. Juliet as well as Reynolds Memorial and Chesapeake in the upper Kanawha Valley until taking a leave of absence in 2021.

It was during this time that I rekindled my calling and that God is working through the church, in ways we have never seen before – like church without a building, or church without a pastor. Things that have never even been considered in other points of my life are now becoming the new normal as the church continues to change and transform to fit the needs of the communities we serve. At the heart of this all is Jesus, the suffering servant, the wounded healer, the failed revolutionary, the powerless messiah – and it is through the lens of Jesus that we can understand what the Holy Spirit is calling us to do in our world today.

So I'm genuinely excited for this new chapter. I'm excited to see ways that St. Andrew and Cross of Grace Lutheran can do ministry together, as well as how all the United Methodist Churches in and around St. Albans can have dynamic ministry together while still being individual, community churches.

I'm genuinely excited to hear about what God has placed on your hearts and in your minds – what troubles you in the world today, and how is the Holy Spirit troubling you to pray AND act. How are we called to live out our faith, not an invisible faith with minimal impact on our communities, but a faith based in the incredible love of Jesus on the Cross – giving everything for everyone that dramatically transforms this beautiful and beloved community we call home.

Lastly, I cannot wait to introduce you to the rest of the family too. Cindy, who some of you have met, is the pastor of St. Mark's United Methodist Church in Charleston – she is brilliant, and kind, both compassionate as well as passionate about following Jesus. Augustine, aka 'Gus', is 7 years old and has a passion for Minecraft, including people in shared activities, and making friends. Gus will be with me most Sundays at St. Andrew, and you will get to know him pretty well over the coming months. My other two are Hildegard and Ignatius (both three), aka 'Hildie' and 'Iggie.' Just over three years ago, the whole West Virginia conference prayed for my wife and both of my daughters during their pregnancy, and your prayers were felt in a very real way. The twins are both funny and weird in their own unique ways, and I look forward to you getting to know them at special opportunities particularly community and family activities.

I cannot wait to begin our time together, and I hope and pray that my gifts and talents match the prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness of St. Andrew UMC – I trust that the Holy Spirit has put us together for holy work in

a very crucial time in the life of the Church. With the Holy Spirit, truly incredible things are possible.

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Pr. Darick J. Biondi
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