BELIEFS & Values

Advertising director answers call to ministry

BY RENA FULKA
SPECIAL WRITER

When Ben Bishop told his wife, Susan, that he wanted to trade his executive office downtown Chicago for a classroom seat at nearby McCormick Theological Seminary, she suggested that maybe all he really needed was a new, red convertible.

But for the senior vice president-group account director of D'Arcy Masius Benton and Bowles Agency in Chicago, this was no mid-life crisis.

"The whole sense of where I wanted to commit myself in life came out of being with people who were going through physical suffering in their lives," said Bishop, who recently lost several friends to terminal illness. "It reawakened my need to have a closer relationship with God."

So after 25 years of climbing the corporate ladder, Bishop followed a call to religious life that eventually led him to Oakland County. But even with the support of Susan, and the couple's two grown children, Ben and Kelly, Bishop admits that, initially, he had his doubts.

"My decision to go to seminary was made with a great sense of contingency," said Bishop, who knew he could always return to the business world if things didn't work out.

Though he was older than most members of the diverse student body, Bishop soon realized that he wasn't all that different from other seminarians.

"Everyone was searching, not certain of the call . . . exploring it and being stimulated by it," recalled the former advertising executive.

And just as he was drawn to the ministry after comforting friends in their time of suffering, Bishop sensed a second reawakening during his chaplaincy training in the geriatrics ward.

"That's where I discovered that God was working through me," said Bishop, who completed his Master's of Divinity degree last summer.

Bishop is now utilizing his love for pastoral care and his business administration skills at the First Presbyterian Church in Birmingham, where he was officially installed as associate pastor on Feb. 18.

"The congregation has been receiving him warmly and he's made a very positive impression," said the Rev. Dr. Ronald P. Byars, pastor.

By a unanimous congregational vote, Bishop became the third member of the church's clerical team. Byars heads the staff and serves as the preacher and the primary designer and leader of worship. And Dr. Louise Westfall, an associate pastor, leads the Saturday evening services and centers her ministry around missions and evangelism.

"Ben will bring, particularly, the gift of having had years of experience in the business world, and having shared the lives that are common to the people of this community," said Byars. "He's had many of the same obligations they've had, and they can identify with him."

Eunice Raur of Beverly Hills chaired the seven-member associate pastor nominating committee that selected Bishop from 135 candidates after a 16-month search.

"We felt that he really had a vocation for the ministry," said Raur, a church member for 30 years who has served on four nominating committees. "And he was rather unique in that he was in the business world for over 25 years."

The First Presbyterian Church was founded in 1834 as the Presbyterian Church of Bloomfield. Members met for worship on Woodward Avenue before taking up residence in the 1950s at the sprawling facility at 1669 W. Maple Road.

Today, with 1,900 members, the Birmingham congregation is one of the largest in the Detroit Presbytery. And it seems to be an ideal setting for Bishop to explore his new vocation.

"I saw this as a place where I could feel welcome, contribute, and grow and learn," said the newly ordained minister, who turned down a position at his home church in LaGrange, Ill. "It will provide me with a better opportunity to utilize the experiences I've had in the last 25 years."

Born in Iowa, Bishop moved to the Chicago suburb of LaGrange as a child. After earning a bachelor's degree in sociology from the University of Illinois, he accepted a job in hospital supply sales for the opportunity to work in New York City.

Unhappy with sales, he returned to Chicago two years later and spent the next 25 years working in the field of advertising.

In his free time, Bishop enjoys reading, bike riding and taking long walks with his wife. But the former executive who once climbed a corporate ladder doesn't seem interested in scaling similar rungs in the clerical world.

"I've been there. I've already done it," said Bishop, who hopes to stay planted. "My initial impression was that this is a place to find a home, not only in the church, but also in the community. There's a real cordiality and friendliness here."

From his office overlooking the courtyard of the First Presbyterian Church, Bishop talks about a walk of faith that doesn't always follow a planned course.

"God empowers us to have new life at any time in our journey," added Bishop. "And regardless of what you've done, where you've been, or what you wish you wouldn't have done, you can confess it and start again."

Ben Bishop
Spiritually reawakened

COMMUNITY MESSENGER

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■ ENSEMBLE TO PERFORM

The Atlantis Ensemble, a consortium of virtuoso musicians from both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, performs at 8 p.m. Friday, March 8, at Christ Church Cranbrook, Cranbrook and Lone Pine Roads, one mile west of Woodward, Bloomfield Hills.

The ensemble, which consists of fortepianist Penelope Crawford, formerly of Birmingham, violinist Jaap Schroder and violoncellist Enid Sutherland, will play chamber music performed in mid-19th century American concert halls by pianist and composer Sigismond Thalberg. A reception will follow.

Tickets, which are $15 for general admission and $10 for students, are available by calling the church at (810)644-5210, ext. 4. Proceeds will benefit Christ Church Cranbrook's organ restoration project.

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