

Heading back to school later in life

'It's changing me from the inside out'

BY *MARISSA DECHANT*

About 36 percent of total students enrolled at ATS schools are defined as "traditional" and attain a degree by the time they are 30. But what if you don't receive the call to seminary until later in life?

Nontraditional students—classified as 30 and older—comprised nearly 64 percent of total students at ATS schools, according to the 2020–21 ATS [Entering Student Questionnaire](#). For those attaining their MDiv degrees, the number of nontraditional students is 56 percent.

Sally Bell, of Franklin, Pennsylvania, found herself in a similar situation in her late forties. Following a varied career in journalism and veterinary technology, she was called to become a pastor while attending a lay speaking class at her church, which is part of the Western Pennsylvania Conference of the United Methodist Church.

"People always ask you about your call, and I had nothing to do with my call," Bell said. "That call came to me from God, completely."

Bell said the district superintendent of the Western Pennsylvania Conference approached her during the class and asked if she wanted to take on a pastoral assignment.

"It was like my world shifted on its axis at that time, and as I meditated on what was right in front of me and what she was asking, everything suddenly made sense. For me, the call from God was more just an alignment of things that had already happened to me in my life . . . and it's like things suddenly made sense," she said.



Bell became a licensed local pastor with the Western Pennsylvania Conference. She began serving at Calvary United Methodist Church in Greenville, Pennsylvania, and currently works as senior pastor there.

While serving in her role, Bell received another call—this time, to attend seminary. By attaining her MDiv degree, she could become ordained within the United Methodist Church and serve as a full-time pastor. Bell applied to the Methodist Theological School in Ohio (MTSO). She received a full scholarship based on an essay she wrote and started classes in the fall of 2019.

"Ever since then, every class I take and every relationship I make at MTSO is more informing and affirming of my call," Bell said. "Attending school has been transformative for me, not just in the academics, but the school is oriented toward justice, and it's really awakened a call and a need in me to serve."

Prior to seminary, Bell received her bachelor's degree in journalism from West Virginia University in 1993, and an associate degree in veterinary technology from the Vet Tech Institute in Pittsburgh in 2013.



Sally Bell

"I'm not somebody who woke up one day and said, 'I want to be a pastor.' I'm somebody who woke up one day, and God told me you're going to be a pastor," she said.

Bell made the three-hour commute to MTSO for her first two semesters. She stayed overnight

and attended classes the next day before making the commute home. Since COVID-19, her classes have been entirely online, which has made it easier for Bell, who has a husband and a three-year-old adopted son.

"As an adult, there were sacrifices that had to be made that wouldn't have been present as a younger person," she said. "Seminary demands a level of maturity that I just didn't have when I was younger. To be where I am, I needed to have some life experiences before, and when I went into seminary, I was married, and we had just adopted our son, Alex."

Bell said seminary greatly differs from her previous education. It has allowed her to think more broadly and critically while being surrounded by students varying in age from twenties to seventies.

"This is why my experience has been so transformative. [The professors] are very good at helping you to orient yourself within the subject matter and then grow within that subject matter," she said.

Bell also has a companion in her husband, Drew Bell, who started his career as a science professor, but decided to attend seminary about ten years ago. He is now an ordained elder in the United Methodist Church and serves three locations.

"That's a very valuable thing to have because he knows where I'm coming from," she said.

Bell is on track to graduate from seminary in the spring of 2022. She and her family are currently planning a move from Franklin to Hermitage, Pennsylvania, as her husband was reappointed to a new church.

"We're excited about the area and about the church community that Drew is going to be pastoring," Bell said.

"I'm becoming the person God needs me to be to serve in this place and time."

After graduation, Bell will continue to pastor and

said she and her family are willing to relocate as needed by the United Methodist Church. For now, she remains focused on her studies and her congregation at Calvary.

"It's changing me from the inside out," Bell said. "I'm becoming the person God needs me to be to serve in this place and time."

Is something happening at your school that would make a good human-interest story? Email your ideas to Marissa Dechant at dechant@ats.edu.



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