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Communications

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Merianna Neely Harrelson '14 is Bi-Vocational Pastor in South Carolina

Graduates of the School of Divinity at Gardner-Webb University leave knowing their professors or classmates will keep in touch. "Any time I email or call a fellow student or professor to ask for advice or find a good resource for something I am preaching and teaching, they will respond," affirmed Merianna Neely Harrelson, who earned her Master of Divinity in Pastoral Studies in 2014.

Harrelson is a bi-vocational pastor of a small congregation in Columbia, S.C. She is also editor-in-chief of Harrelson Press, an independent publishing house, and runs a ministry with her husband that connects neighbors in need to resources in the community.



She left a teaching career to answer God's call to pastoral ministry. She faced opposition from people who didn't believe women could serve as pastors. "It was a difficult decision to make the switch from full-time teacher to full-time student," Harrelson offered. "My call was so clear I just couldn't run from answering it any longer. I knew that if I was called to lead and guide God's people, I needed to study as much as I could in an environment that challenged my understandings and interpretations of the Bible."

The faculty at Gardner-Webb offered practical insight from their own involvement in churches and parish ministry. "Our classes included not only the academic approach to the Bible, research, and current church context, but also the implementation," Harrelson related. "The professors had already experienced some of the tough conversations and situations that I was encountering as I served in ministry. They knew the challenges to making what we were learning relevant in the church contexts. This was invaluable, because as I graduated, my professors were also my colleagues in ministry."



Merianna Neely Harrelson, left front, poses with members of her congregation as they prepare to offer a blessing over a high school graduate before she went off to college.

Some of her favorite professors and classes were Dr. Danny West's Preaching Practicum, which provided opportunities to preach and receive feedback. Dr. Sheri Adams' class on The Cross helped her realize how the New Testament writers struggled to put into words the meaning of the miraculous, mysterious act of sacrifice. "After studying all of the mentions of the cross, perhaps I understood most importantly that there really are no words to describe God sending His son in human form," Harrelson shared.

Dr. Jim McConnell's New Testament courses introduced her to the concept that the writers of the gospels and the New Testament were coming from a certain time and place. "Just like we as preachers and teachers are inevitably tied to our contexts," she noted. "Examining and discovering the rich diversity that exists in the New Testament is something I try to remind my parishioners of as we study the New Testament texts."

Harrelson also hopes to consistently invite people to open their eyes and hearts to the way God speaks today. "It is often quite difficult to find hope and to find God in the midst of our current context," she observed, "but there are whispers of the divine all around us if we will but open our ears to hear."