

ALUMNI

GWU Alumna's Undergraduate and Divinity Degrees Prepared Her for Ministry in Sweden

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▲ Jordana Hart Surell with daughter, Tirsia Grace, son Josiah, and husband Andreas

Jordana H. Surell ('01, '05) Shares God's Love with Everyone, Everywhere She Goes

How did a little girl, who grew up in Hickory, N.C., end up 4,436 miles away, serving as a missionary in Stockholm, Sweden, for 16 years? "It's totally Jesus," asserted Jordana Hart Surell. She was 9 years old when she accepted Jesus as her Savior and Lord. She promised to follow Him, even when His directions didn't make sense.

"The first time I heard God talk to me I was in high school attending a Beta Club convention in Greensboro, N.C.," she reflected. The guest speaker was Clayton King, a 1995 alumnus of Gardner-Webb University. King talked about relationships, not his college experience.

However, as she listened to King, she also heard God's voice loud and clear. "Everyone else around me was cackling, and I started bawling, like huge tears pouring down my face, and I felt the Lord saying, 'You are supposed to go to Gardner-Webb,'" she remembered.

She was crying, because the Lord's presence was overwhelming. Additionally, she had accepted a scholarship and was assigned as roommate at another college, but knew the Lord would work it out. Surell left the auditorium to call her mom on a pay phone. While waiting on her mom to answer, she whispered a prayer, "God, if this is actually what you've said to me, then my mom will not freak out on me." Her mother calmly replied, "Well, if that's what God said to you."

Surell called Gardner-Webb and was amazed when the admissions counselor knew her name and rattled off her SAT scores without looking them up. She told him she would need financial aid, because her mother was a single parent. It was February; she filled out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). In August, she hadn't heard anything, and she got the news that her FAFSA was randomly selected for national testing. Eventually, she learned that all she had to pay was \$1,000 a year. I said, 'That's totally Jesus.'"



▲ Stockholm, Sweden

She majored in religious studies with a concentration in religious education. "I treasure my Gardner-Webb experience very much," she affirmed. "It has totally formed me for the better. I think one of the best things about my education is that I was constantly told by my professors to look it up and figure it out myself. That is one of the greatest things any professor can teach...critical thinking."

Her sophomore year she received a letter that would change her life—again. The letter invited her to apply for the Scandinavian Caravan, a longtime program through the United Methodist Church of Western North Carolina. She was accepted, and in the summer of 1999, went with 14 people to five countries, visiting 12 cities in five weeks.

"Some of the people went over for a fun, cultural experience," Surell commented. "I totally went over as a mission trip. I wanted to share the Gospel. The second we stepped off the plane in Oslo, I experienced something that I've never experienced before. I felt like I walked into a wall of spiritual darkness. I immediately started asking questions in every church we were in; everybody we met. What's going on here? What's the spiritual climate like? I had so many questions."

She learned that Scandinavia was comprised of some of the most secular countries in the world. "The people have no interest in the gospel and Jesus. I just felt like the Lord was working something in me," Surell shared. "In the middle of our trip, we were on this Danish island of Bornholm, and I was talking with two pastors at this picnic and distinctly heard the Lord's voice say, 'I'm placing this call on your life to serve me as a missionary in Scandinavia.'"

When she returned to Gardner-Webb, she began to wonder if she'd heard God correctly. Her first sign was the church in Bornholm asked her to come back as a youth pastor. She didn't take the job, because she thought it was important to finish her education at Gardner-Webb. "I asked for a bigger sign and it was about three months later, I walked into the cafeteria and there was a huge sign hanging from the mezzanine that said, 'Study in Sweden,' and I said, 'Hmm, that could be my sign,'" she related.

Again, how to pay for the semester abroad was on her mind. However, when she talked to the program's director, she found out that it would be cheaper for her to spend the semester in Sweden. She studied Scandinavian culture, because that would be helpful if she was going to be living in Sweden. To learn even more about the country, she lived with a Swedish family instead of staying in a dorm. "Having studied at Gardner-Webb and growing up in Hickory, it was an enormous culture shock just to be at a school that was known as a party school," she said. "There were three student pubs on campus."

The nearest church that was equivalent to the Baptist denomination was located in the city. There wasn't a bus, so she took a taxi and it cost \$30. She couldn't do that every week and the other students didn't want to share a ride with her, because they wanted to party. She started praying and did something she had never done before. "I started hanging out at the student pubs," Surell said. "Every single night, I got to share Jesus with at least one person. It was incredible. I had this open door, because random people talk to everybody when you are in this international program. I constantly had people asking what did I study back home, and where was I from."



▲ [Linnaeus University \(https://lnu.se/en/\)](https://lnu.se/en/) is a state university in the Swedish historical province Småland, with two campuses located in Växjö and Kalmar.

When she told them she was studying religious studies and religious education, they would ask her questions—some she didn't know how to answer. Questions like, How do you know God is a man and not a woman? Trying to answer their questions helped her to realize that she needed to further her theological education, and she decided to stay at GWU in the School of Divinity. She came back to

America, received her Bachelor of Arts in Religious Studies in 2001, and began praying about paying for divinity school and getting a job. “And then the Lord spoke to me, 1 Thessalonians 5:24: ‘He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it (ESV).’”

Surell worked as a Graduate Resident Director, and she earned her Master of Divinity in Missiology in 2005. One of her favorite professors was Dr. Sophia Steibel, professor of Christian Education and Spiritual Formation, because she taught in concepts. “Dr. Steibel’s test and her way of learning was to give you a blank sheet of paper with one sentence at the top and you had to fill up the whole paper with everything you knew about that.”

She discovered that there were only two mission organizations working in Sweden and neither was a good fit for her. Her first job was working as a nanny with a Swedish family. “The first Sunday I was in Stockholm, I visited a church called New Life (<https://newlife.nu/site/main/>), an international church with members from 50 different countries. I was there for 10 years. I got a job in the church as a part-time administrator and worked there for several years.”

Not finding a church or organization to support her financially, she decided to model her ministry after Paul, who was a tent maker. “I ended up working all kinds of jobs to support myself and considered my mission field to be everywhere I ended up and whoever I ended up talking to,” she observed.



▲ Jordana and Andreas Surell

She met her husband, Andreas, at church. They were friends for several years, and have been married 10 years. Their first child, Levi, died in childbirth, and they have a 6.5-year-old son, Josiah, and a 4.5-year-old daughter, Tirsa Grace. In 2018, she took a job at Söderhöjdskyrkan Stockholm, (<https://www.facebook.com/soderhojds kyrkan>), a 200-member church in the same denomination but located in the middle of town. Half of the members are children, and their parents volunteer to help with many activities. “I am the family and children’s coordinator and administrator,” she said. “I love administration, I realized, I definitely have a gift for administration and evangelization. I love kids, especially small ones, because they ask amazingly smart questions about Jesus.”

Over the past year, navigating through COVID-19 has been difficult, and she's had to take some time off. Decisions that were obvious before the pandemic were much more problematic. She's had to find the balance to meet both safety concerns and psychological needs for connection and community. The church offered several Zoom sessions for different age levels and was one of the first churches in the city to begin offering services online. With the older children they've tried to do outdoor activities as much as possible, like ice skating or camping activities.

Things are slowly getting back to normal. Sweden started rolling out vaccines recently and she got one this month (June 2021). The church also held its first in-person church service with 50 people in assigned seats.

Because of all the different jobs she's held, people say to her that she didn't need a college education if she were going to move to another country and work in a café or in an office. "I feel like I've used my education on a daily basis," she asserted. "I constantly get questions and end up in conversations, and I remember we talked about that in school, or this was an issue that we discussed. I think it completely prepared me."



▲ Jordana and Tirsia
Grace

Two of her most memorable professors were Dr. Don Berry, professor of religious studies, and Dr. Alice Cullinan, professor emerita of religion. Berry's classes were mission related, and the one that influenced her the most was a class that examined how Bible stories are interpreted by different cultures. A class on cults by Cullinan also helps her when she's talking to people.

"I loved all my teachers and they were just so personable," she said. "They cared about us and they could tell when we were struggling with something or not doing well. They would take us aside and talk to us about it. That was a huge blessing."

Reflecting on why God directed her to Gardner-Webb, Surell said the relationships she formed with her professors and other students were a unique gift. As a child of divorce and multiple broken homes, she longed for a family and security. "I was without a doubt blessed with those things at GWU," she shared.

“Gardner-Webb was a very safe space where we were encouraged to think critically and figure things out for ourselves instead of just accepting the Christian culture around us. I believe such teaching, especially among evangelical Christian universities, is rare and something I most likely would not have received elsewhere. I am so thankful for all that the Lord did in and through me at GWU.”

Learn more about the M. Christopher White School of Divinity. 

Learn more about the Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy. 



