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CHRISTIAN SERVICE

GWU Divinity School Alumna Begins Hybrid Position as Minister of Youth and Pastoral Care

BY OFFICE OF UNIVERSITY COMMUNICATIONS ON FEBRUARY 3, 2022



▲ Sarah Laurence, standing, leads a group of young people in an activity.

Through Her Studies, Sarah Laurence, '21, Discovered Her Unique Calling

Sarah Laurence, a 2021 graduate of the Gardner-Webb University School of Divinity, is starting a job that is new for her and the church. The hybrid position at First Baptist Church in Aiken, S.C., is Minister of Youth and Pastoral Care.

Laurence obtained her Master of Divinity degree from GWU with a concentration in pastoral care and counseling. At First Baptist Church in Aiken, S.C., she will lead and coordinate activities for the youth program and assist in pastoral care—visiting hospital patients and home-bound members and having office hours for counseling.



“Because it is a new position, we are in the process of developing what it will look like,” she conveyed. “I will be doing a lot of what the senior pastor also does (in pastoral care) as we broaden this position while continuing my youth responsibilities.”

While the job is new, First Baptist, Aiken, is not new to Laurence. She’s been going there since she was a teenager and began serving as the interim youth director in June 2021. Previously, she was an intern there and at First Baptist Church, Greenville, S.C. Additionally, she was in hospital chaplaincy while completing a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education at Spartanburg (S.C.) Regional Medical Center. Laurence has an undergraduate degree in sociology from the University of South Carolina-Aiken.

She was introduced to the GWU School of Divinity when she attended youth camps as an undergraduate intern. “A friend of mine, Tabatha Coker, a former employee and graduate of Gardner-Webb Divinity School, would host a table to talk about the program,” Laurence related. “After a few summers of seeing that table, I decided to do a preview day for the School of Divinity during the fall of my senior year in college.”



On the visit to GWU, she felt at home and began her application that evening. “I think what helped me make my final decision to attend Gardner-Webb was that every time I had a conversation with someone, they treated me like they had known me for years, and I mattered,” she observed. “Whether it was questions about scholarships or scheduling, everyone was so attentive and truly cared—particularly Kheresa Harmon (divinity school director of admissions).”

Laurence became interested in ministry when she was 14 and met her first female minister. She went to her friend's youth group, because her church didn't have weeknight programming. As she observed how this woman in ministry prepared her Bible studies and planned events, she discovered that she loved the inner workings of the church. "She was my minister, my mentor, and my friend; and to this day she is one of the closest relationships I have," Laurence stated. "I never imagined I could be called to ministry, but it was the opportunities she gave me to work alongside her as I grew older that helped bring out my calling. Honestly, I don't think we choose ministry, ministry chooses us. The question is at what point do we quit fighting it and allow it to work in us. My answer to that question is when I realized that nothing made me as happy as when I was in the church with my students."

Further reflecting on her experience as a student in the School of Divinity, Laurence said she valued the school's diversity. When she started in 2018, she was one of six other students who came to divinity school as recent undergraduates. "This obviously created a much different environment than I had been used to, but I am so grateful for it," she acknowledged. "Class discussions were filled with the life experience of individuals from different races and cultures in their 20s all the way up to those in their 60s and 70s. This cultivated a space of such meaningful conversation and growth for all of us. I learned not just about so many different individuals' service and life in ministry but their lives in general."



She appreciated the foundational classes and the professors who taught Old and New Testament, Biblical languages, Christian History and Theology as well as the practical classes in Worship and Preaching, which included an opportunity to perform a baptism. However, Dr. Hebert Palomino, professor of pastoral care and counseling, stands out because he helped her discern her unique abilities. "Through countless readings, a few years of serious reflection and introspection, and six months of emotionally rigorous Clinical Pastoral Education, I discovered so much about myself and my ministry," she reflected. "Overall, I am so grateful for each part that my professors played in this journey."

She concluded, "The School of Divinity is a family that shared in the joys and sorrows of life together. We rejoiced with one another as classmates got married, started new jobs, had babies and grandbabies, and so much more. We tried our best to comfort each other over Zoom as the pandemic hit and changed our way of life. We prayed together as churches were shutting down, leaving many

uncertain as to what was to come for their positions. We grieved as a community as our classmates were losing those close to them. The people I met and the relationships I built are invaluable, and I couldn't be more thankful to have shared this experience with them."

Learn more about programs offered by the School of Divinity. 

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