

ANDY KEITH: QUIET ACTIVIST & DEVOTED CONGREGANT

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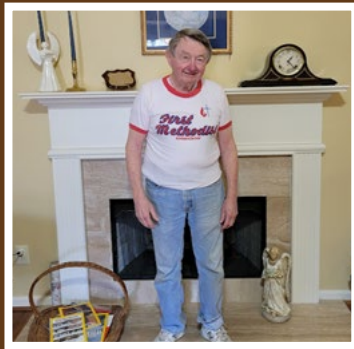
Andy, c. 1942, with Dad, Elbert Ward Keith, a machinist at Steward Plant, & Cousins Sandra (middle) & Carol Ann (right)



The Keith children, 1971. Gina (rear left), Stephen (rear right), Rebecca (front left), Nancy (front right).



Nancy Keith (right) atop favorite pet, Andy, & Rebecca Keith (right) with her precious Bear, c. 1979



Andy, February 9, 2020 in his favorite First Methodist Softball tee shirt



Andy's and Emily's Wedding Day in First Church Sanctuary, November 18, 2012

Andy Keith wears his emotions on his sleeve, choking back tears as he recalled joining First Church. It was fifty years ago. Andy was a new doctor, then, proud husband to Ann, adoptive father of Gina and Stephen, father of baby Rebecca, and expectant father of Nancy, their last. The church welcomed this family of five in 1971, then threw its arms around the sprawling six, and has never let go. For Andy, he “was home” at First Church and, like the congregation, has never let go.

Much, of course, changed in the five intervening decades. Families don't grow without challenges – and sometimes tragedies – and churches don't progress without looking in the mirror and moving closer to their calling. Andy Keith and First Church took their journeys together and, as each looks back, there is a pattern, first of contentment with the status quo, then, a questioning of what is right, and finally, the decisions to change.

Like First Church, perhaps, Andy lived through the turbulent Sixties and Seventies grounded in traditional family values and theological understanding. He grew up in East Lake, attended Lake Highlands Methodist Church, excelled at Woodlawn High School, and for a time dated a girl named Emily Gannaway. His early days were typical – for straight, white boys – and mostly uneventful. Soon after graduation he attended UAB Medical School, met and married Ann Neal, completed a stint at Fort Bragg, then came home to Birmingham. Always a churchgoer, he and Ann decided to attend Trinity Methodist Church because of Ed Kimbrough, its pastor, whom they later followed to First Church. He loved Kimbrough's dramatic style, baritone voice, and inspirational messages. Andy was content.

First Church loved Andy and his family, and he loved his church. He loved Sunday School, Wednesday night service and supper, and second base with the church softball team. He loved how it supported his family through Ann's hard Caesarian delivery of Nancy; young Nancy's pregnancy and birth of son, Gregory; Andy's parents' deaths; and tragically, Ann's terrible and swift cancer. His church family asked what he needed and gave it. That was what it did. He had expected nothing less.

After Ann's death in 2011, Andy struggled to move forward. He wasn't sure how, exactly, but he knew one thing. He wanted "some adult conversation, some real adult conversation" and "figured that since I wasn't horribly ugly or a serial killer," maybe he could have it. He thought of several women he would ask to lunch. One was his former "sweetheart," Emily – by then widowed – with whom he felt an instant and renewed "spark." They dated a while then married in 2012. They invited the whole congregation to attend and held the wedding just after Sunday morning service.

As Andy embraced life with Emily, First Church wrestled with its own future. In 2000 it decided to offer a contemporary service partly attended by new – African American – youth and, later, their families. The church also looked for ways to bring down gender barriers and LGBTQ discrimination. Always physically downtown, it wanted to be a downtown church, an urban church, a place open for all. Exactly what that meant, and which members would agree, was anybody's guess.

As his church progressed, Andy thought of his own evolution. “I was clueless,” he recalled, especially about the realities of racism throughout the Sixties and Seventies. He regularly heard the “N word” growing up, in his home, school, work, and social activities. He did not understand why Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. “I thought he was a trouble-maker,” he recalls candidly. Mostly, though, he did not pay it much mind. But, as the years passed, and his medical practice grew, Andy questioned what he’d been taught about supposed racial differences. He realized that white people had the same number and type of diseases that black people did; and that black people’s blood was the same red as his own. He started to see a “contradiction” between what he had learned as a child and what he knew as a medical man.

“It was an easy transition for me,” Andy said, when the church moved actively toward racial inclusion. The same “continuum in my own awareness and thinking” was also true of his embrace of gender and LGBTQ needs. “There was no sudden awareness,” he notes, “that, ‘hey, I’ve been saved,’ like some people describe.” Instead, he said, again fighting tears, “It was gradually just a turning on of a light or awareness, I guess.”

Characteristically, he added quickly and emphatically, “I want to be sure and say I wasn’t one of the movers and shakers in that process. I’ve always been a lot slower than others to change my habits and ways of thinking. I’m not quick to get out there and march in the streets. I’m not an activist in the traditional sense of the word.” (This interviewer reminded him, however, of his early and consistent participation in Birmingham AIDS and LGBTQ-related demonstrations! He conceded the point.)

“I just want people to know where I stand,” Andy said.

STORIES FROM
150
YEARS

