



April 2020 Newsletter

by Dr. Melissa Pearce, Director of Alumni & Partner Relationships

It was just over a month ago when people packed Saint Paul UMC in Shawnee, Oklahoma, on a late Sunday afternoon. No hint of social distancing could be observed. There were hardly six inches between participants – never mind six feet. Then, it felt a little uncomfortable, but today the gathered closeness would be welcomed. Ironically, the standing-room-only event centered on solidarity, the idea of human connectedness and how we as Christians live out these realities. These very lessons are repeatedly being taught and tested during this pandemic.

Rev. Dr. Tiffany Nagel Monroe, an alumna of Saint Paul School of Theology and a member of the inaugural class on the Oklahoma campus, is now Lead Pastor at Saint Paul UMC and did not know how the town of Shawnee or her congregants would receive her passion of interfaith collaboration and dialogue. She was not sure the church would support her desire to host a screening of the film *Same God* in its sanctuary. The documentary centers on a Shawnee native, Dr. Laryica Hawkins, and her firing from Wheaton College for publicly expressing her commitment as a Christian woman to wear a hijab during Advent to stand in solidarity with female Muslim Americans facing increasing political and social backlash after the 2016 election. As it details the decision of Dr. Hawkins and the aftermath of her statements that she stands with her Muslim sisters and the very God of both Christians and Muslims, it also explores the systemic racism, doctrinal rigidity, and religiopolitical machines embedded within evangelistic Christianity.

Even knowing the hard theological and social questions the film would raise, Rev. Monroe took the opportunity to join the efforts of several non-profits, religious entities, and community members to the church leadership and suggested Saint Paul UMC host the event. They not only agreed but volunteered to be greeters and ushers and to prepare for the visiting community.

The packed sanctuary itself was a lesson in connectedness among differences. One could see people of all ages. Some were in suits and others donned overalls. Some were church members; others were Saint Paul School of Theology seminary students representing the Women in Ministry student group or members of the Shawnee community-at-large. Some were Christians and other Muslims. For three hours, this myriad of people participated in this collective, communal exercise of watching the documentary and then engaging with a panel that included Dr. Hawkins, the film's director, Linda Midgett, and local Christian and Muslim clergy. It was a time of deep questioning and frank discussion of the human condition and both the fragility and the strength of what ties all humans together, which eerily now seems like preparation for the pandemic we are navigating.

Rev. Monroe reflects the shaping one expects from Saint Paul School of Theology graduates – she is a steward of community and social justice and leads rooted in these tenets. She is a 2017 recipient of the Harry Denman Evangelism Award for Clergy by the Foundation for Evangelism, which highlighted her work in community partnerships and establishing after school programs for youths in rural Oklahoma communities. Her innovative ministry has led to tripling growth in congregations where she has served. Dr. Monroe has also been a long-time advocate for women, HIV/AIDS, and public education. She leads boldly and is willing to face hard discussions in unsettled times. We are thankful for her witness and for providing this month's alumni devotional.