

70 YEARS

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Robert Bailey, 95 of Jefferson City, recounts 70 years of service in the ministry.



Robert Bailey has been talking his way out of jams since his high school days in the late 1930s. He said the only time he's ever wanted to be quiet is when he's listening to his wife's singing. "My wife, by the way, she has a wonderful soprano voice, real opera quality," Bailey said. "So everywhere I've been, she's sang."

Everywhere he's been includes Hungary, Transylvania, Greece, Scotland, Russia, Ukraine and Romania — though he said he and his wife did a lot of "bucket-list traveling" after Bailey retired from working as an ordained minister in 2019.

"Retired under protest," Bailey added.

Tuesday is Bailey's 70th anniversary of ordination. He was the first from his hometown church in Bridgeville, Pennsylvania, a coal mining town just outside of Pittsburgh, to go into the ministry.

"I'm happy to say I may have been the first, but I'm not the only and haven't been for a while. And that's good news," he said.

He didn't always set out to be a minister. He was returning from serving in World War II, just a little more than 18 years old, and he joined several of his fellow veterans in attending Grove City College in Pennsylvania. At first, he was studying to be a research chemist.

A lot of his fellow veterans were going into the ministry and taking courses as pre-theological students, he said.

Bailey was visiting a church while in college when a missionary speaker read aloud a scripture from chapter 10 of Paul's letter to the Romans. The speaker read other Scriptures, too, Bailey said, but only one followed him home:

“All who call upon the name of the Lord will be saved. How shall they hear of him, of whom they have not believed? How shall they believe in him, of whom they have never heard? How shall they hear without a preacher? How shall he preach unless he is sent?”

Bailey had that verse stuck in his head for two months until one summer night, he “gave in and said, ‘OK, Lord, I’ll do it.’”

By “it,” he meant prepare to enter the ministry; Bailey changed his undergraduate major from chemistry to history — the community college he attended in Pennsylvania did not have a seminary department.

Once he made that promise, he said he was suddenly overcome with an immense feeling of purpose and peace.

For seminary school, he attended the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa, on a full scholarship.

The decision disappointed his parents, he said, as they were hoping he’d stay close to home, but he soon fell in love with the area. Not including his two years at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland, where he got his doctorate, Bailey has lived in the Midwest ever since.

Since he’s been out of school, Bailey has been serving small churches in small towns. He learned about agriculture during his time in Iowa when he walked the fields with the farmers and listened to them talk about the work they’ve been doing.

“I didn’t talk, I let them talk. And that’s not easy for me, she can tell you,” Bailey said, pointing to his wife, Annel.

“Imagine that,” Annel said with a giggle from the other side of the living room in the house their son-in-law built almost 20 years ago — a two-garage, one-story brick red home surrounded by trees and filled with pictures.

Bailey worked as a professor for the University of Dubuque, teaching the Bible and Greek, and then at Park College in Kansas City, another Presbyterian university. There, Bailey moved up to chair of the Department of Philosophy and Religion.

It was in Kansas City that Bailey began his work in the inner city. Before he moved, he was in town looking for housing for his seven children, his wife and himself when a member of a local Presbyterian Church asked Bailey to assist in church services.

He got a job serving as the interim pastor for an all-Black Presbyterian Church.

“I was the only white face in the place,” Bailey said. “I wound up being the longest-serving pastor they had in nearly 20 years.”

And for several years after Bailey moved, he said when this church’s installed pastor had to leave, they would ask Bailey to step in.

“Which I was glad to do because I had many friends there,” he said. “It was a wonderful bunch of people.”

Bailey’s work wasn’t limited to inside the church walls. He worked with local youths to coordinate church-sponsored basketball games, he volunteered at methadone clinics, soup kitchens and halfway houses.

He met a man who was a German soldier in World War II. Bailey said this man had felt so guilty after the war, “when he found out what Hitler was really like,” that he moved to the inner cities of the United States to do much of the same work as Bailey.

This man and Bailey worked together to organize a home repair project in which they not only repaired local homes for low-income residents, but also taught them how to keep up with maintenance.

Three of the other men involved in that project went on to work as contractors, Bailey said, and successful ones at that.

Bailey said he never felt uncomfortable, though he can’t speak for everyone. One of his final projects in Kansas City was setting up a GED program at the local community college. In addition to that, Bailey was looking to include a four-year degree program at the local community college, but administrators from the local university were not so excited about the idea.

One of Bailey’s favorite stories is when a white male administrator came to visit Bailey in the inner city.

Bailey said his front-desk assistant told him the story later, as he wasn’t there: The administrator had apparently stopped at a gas station nearby and was telling Bailey’s assistant he was surprised to see so many Black people surrounding him.

The administrator asked Bailey’s assistant, “Do you really mean Dr. Bailey comes down here?” Bailey said his assistant told the man, “Dr. Bailey comes down here any time he damn well pleases.”

Which was true. Bailey said he could be found in the area at any time of day, assisting in volunteer organizations or just talking to friends.

“I was pretty well known in the inner city, not the suburbs, but in the inner city,” Bailey said. He said he never understood the hatred some people have in their hearts. He wants to celebrate diversity and peoples’ differences.

“There’s all kinds of colors of humans, we’re all humans,” he said. “Race is a human creation.”

Growing up in Pennsylvania, he recalled a white neighbor of his complaining that the Black people living nearby “stink.”

“And I go, ‘Well, I play basketball with them and sure, we all stink out there,’” Bailey said.

He said there’s no reason to expect or want everybody to be the same, because humans aren’t robots and God never intended people to look or act the same, but to be individuals.

“I’m also unhappy with the growing anti-Semitism in our country,” he said. “It doesn’t belong here. Let’s leave it with Hitler — buried. Where it ought to be.”

Bailey made himself an integral part of his community. At Park College, despite only teaching elective courses, he became very close with several students and said he had one of the largest teaching loads of anybody in the school.

“I didn’t have a problem with having students, and I was always glad that they came to me a lot for advice,” Bailey said.

Over the years, Bailey had students from Iran, Saudi Arabia and Oman. These students were in the U.S. on federal permission and had been appointed a special administrator to assist them in adjusting to a new environment.

“But they would rather come and talk to me and my wife,” Bailey said. “So I was more their adviser than the adviser, which was fine.”

Bailey met and married Annel in 1965. She soon became his companion and coworker, as well as his spouse. Annel told him she had just one task for him: To go and do what the Lord wants. She promised to pay the bills.

Bailey said he never would have been able to devote himself to the church and to education as much as he did if not for his wife. She worked as a certified public accountant for several different companies.

There were several years in which Annel was the only one of them bringing in any money. Bailey left teaching after 1984 because he said it became too difficult to find and keep a job. “They wanted young and cheap, and I couldn’t convince them to go for old and cheap,” he said.

He went back to serving as a pastor and minister for local Midwest Presbyterian churches. In 1995, when Bailey was working as a pastor for the Warrendale Presbyterian Church in St. Paul, Minnesota, he started regularly visiting Hungary.

There, the members of the Presbytery and the Transdanubian district formed a relationship that resulted in Bailey visiting Hungary more than 25 times in 10 years.

Bailey set up a partner-church program in Hungary so that disadvantaged communities would have access to religion.

Now, Bailey spends his days listening to his wife sing and reading to children. He visits classrooms once a week during the school year to read Winnie the Pooh stories.

“And they just love it,” he said. “I do the voices, too, by the way, as best I can.”

In Bailey’s bedroom, hanging near the TV, is a small construction paper heart from a Miss Kimberly’s class, thanking Bailey for reading to them.