**Life Out of the Ordinary**

**By:  Sarah West**

**Chapter 1**

**Walking by Faith, Not by Sight**

*“God told Abram: ‘Leave your country, your family, and your father’s home for a land that I will show you.’”*

*(Genesis 12:1, The Message)*

The words “Go ye Therefore” took on real meaning for us in October of 1993. Even though this time, it was Charles and Sarah, not Abraham and Sarah, we obeyed.

We had already left employment and our property in Louisiana. Sarah was born and grew up in the Lafayette, LA area, attended college there, and spent fourteen years working in retail management and banking. Charles, after completing college in Florida, had worked in oil exploration and as an educator for eighteen years in LA. In faith, believing God for provision and leading, we moved from Louisiana in order for Charles to attend seminary. While finishing seminary studies at the, then, Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, PA Charles was invited to do a two-year ministry field experience that evolved, near its end, into an interim pastoral leadership role at an American Baptist church in the Germantown community of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

We were at Enon Tabernacle Baptist Church, after completion of Charles’ MDiv. Program, for about another four months when we were asked if Charles would consider being a pastoral candidate for an ABC church in New Hampshire.

The initial telephone interview call from New Hampshire came on a day when we were moving out of one house into another. Near the end of the period that Charles served in interim leadership, we had been allowed to live rent-free for two months in a nice two-story duplex. We now needed to vacate this and move into an old, drafty two-bedroom rent house that Sarah did not like. We had hoped this housing would be a temporary set up. It was!  Within four months, we would be leaving that drafty old house, Philadelphia, our church and family support system.

To say we did not know much about New Hampshire except that it was located in the northeast and it was cold, would be an understatement.

Charles had received other ministry opportunity offers right out of seminary but they did not seem to be in line with what we felt God had called us to do. They just did not seem to be the right fit. We prayed about whether Charles should consider the pastoral candidate opportunity for the New Hampshire ABC church, and it felt like the right thing to do. After checking the Internet to learn more about New Hampshire, we found that it listed the minority population as .06%. One of the search committee members playfully told us, the church was “multicultural.”  People who had come from Nova Scotia, England and other places in Europe were members of this New Hampshire church community. Therefore, it was international and multicultural!

Clearly, this was going to be a different life, ministry and culture than a man from hustle-bustle inner city Philadelphia, and a Creole woman from a hot, rural farming community in Louisiana had experienced. However, we knew that if God had called us, then He had already equipped us. Still, for us this move was another big leap of faith.

After prayer, our next move was to call the search committee to make sure they knew we were African Americans. We did not want to drive the eight hours from Philadelphia, PA to Belmont, NH to be told, “The position has already been filled.”  The search committee told us they were aware of our ethnic background and awaited our arrival.

After more interviews and discussions, we drove to New Hampshire where Charles preached in a neutral pulpit. The committee of the church conducting the pastoral search was there and liked his ministry style and what they heard, and asked us to come back the next month for Charles to preach at their church and be presented as their pastoral candidate. We did, and First Baptist Church- Belmont, NH voted and called Charles as their full-time pastor.

How would he answer God’s call?  Challenged by the Spirit through the words of Jesus, “Do you love me? … Will you feed my sheep?”  Charles answered “Yes. Lord.” Another challenge would come. “Will you feed God’s sheep- even if the sheep don’t look like you? - Even, if the sheep don’t talk like you?”  We would, again, answer “Yes, Lord.” We took the first step, serving people who did not look like us. Charles accepted the call to become pastor of First Baptist Church and we left Philadelphia, PA for Belmont, NH.

Leaving the traditions he had grown up with, the gospel music and soulful singing, the liveliness and emotional expressiveness of the African American church for a quiet, other-cultured congregation was not something that he had ever consciously given much thought to. However, if he had any concerns about what such a ministry would be like, Charles laid them aside when one of the pastoral search committee members said; “Pastor, we want you to know there are hurting people here, and we just want somebody who is going to preach the word.”

We knew the church had an interim pastor assisting them, but really did not find out that, for some time, the church had not had a full-time pastor. We realized this church ministry would be almost like planting a new church. The members of this church community were very courageous to call us to shepherd this flock, it was both humbling and inspiring.

As any parents moving young children to a new community, we were concerned about how our children would be accepted and treated. We trusted that God would give us insight and wisdom to raise our children in this new environment.

We believed God would give us what we needed. We took our eyes off the circumstances and put them on Him, and so the journey for this portion of our “walk of faith” began.

After the church vote affirming the “call” for Charles to become pastor of the church, the search committee called to ask when we could move to Belmont. We told them that Sarah had to give a notice of leaving for the job she held in the Office of the General Secretary at the American Baptist Churches, USA (ABCUSA) headquarters in Valley Forge, PA. She had been working at the ABCUSA denominational office since 1991.

Some of that time, Sarah worked in International Ministries (IM) and some of the time, she helped in the Office of the General Secretary (OGS) with the “In Mission” magazine. Sarah gave notice; we packed up our furniture and left Philadelphia for New Hampshire at the end of January 1994. With the help of the Belmont First Baptist Church secretary, her husband (who was then chairperson of the diaconate), and thankfully, another church member who was one of the best big rig drivers in New Hampshire, we packed up our furniture, the two babies we had at the time, and moved to New Hampshire.

The church was a beautiful white wooden structure in a picture-perfect setting on a hill in the little village of Belmont, NH. Because it was virtually a church restart, the congregation was small and the giving was irregular and could not fully support a full-time pastor. With the help of an American Baptist Churches pastor’s compensation assistance program, the church received financial support to cover a part of the pastor compensation expenses. This was a three-year financial assistance program that decreased, yearly, the portion it provided to assist with the payment of pastor compensation.

The winter months were icy and the snow seemed to fall in precision and lay in just the right places to form a picture-perfect wonderland. The church members had just built a brand-new two-story parsonage that was waiting for children to occupy it. Fully carpeted, five bedrooms and two bathrooms; this was above all that we had prayed or asked for. The upstairs bathroom had large counter tops and double sinks, the study had ample built-in bookshelves and the basement was huge. What more could we ask for coming from an old, drafty two-bedroom rent house in a high crime inner-city area?

We had a beautiful backyard that was wooded and safe. The area was so peaceful and secure that we did not have to lock the parsonage or the car doors. We jokingly said, “The only time we locked the car doors was during zucchini season because you might find your backseat full of zucchinis”.

On the side of the church was a well-manicured cemetery with beautiful old trees that were awesomely beautiful, when the leaves changed to vibrant colors, during the fall season. The New England states are known for their beautiful foliage during autumn. “Peepers” would come from all over the United States just to view the explosion of color like what we had in our very back yard.

We moved in to the new parsonage with our nearly three-year-old daughter, Chasah, our thirteen-month-old baby boy, Caleb, and our soon to be born baby girl, Charliese. Because Caleb was born two months premature, he and Sarah had to spend a lot of time in the hospital in Pennsylvania. Therefore, when we got to New Hampshire, Sarah did not want to see a doctor any time soon, nor be confined to a hospital for any length of time for the upcoming delivery.

After arriving in New Hampshire, we made a few phone calls and through word of mouth found a mid-wife who came highly recommended. Charliese was born at home in the parsonage, three months after we had moved there and thus began our ministry in “The Live Free or Die” state of New Hampshire.

The ministry in a small village in NH was almost like being community pastor. Everyone in the town knew our family and that Charles was “Pastah.”  The people at the bank, the people at the grocery store, and the people at the gas station knew. The students at the Middle School and High school, the faculty all knew, the people at the town meetings knew. At the area health clinic and hospital, they knew. Everybody knew he was the pastor of the “Little white church” up on the hill.

Ministry started slowly at the church, there was so much that was needed. The church had a part-time musician who came to the church only on Sunday mornings. She would enter after the worship service started; play a hymn on an old tracker pipe organ, sometimes filing her nails during parts of the worship and the sermon, and leave before the end of the service to be on time for her part-time job at a department store.

The church had a group of three, or four, faithful women who would bravely stand and sing, unaccompanied, whatever song they had worked out in practice. The number of people committed and willing to do the work of the ministry was small. The congregation was predominantly senior citizens. There were no volunteer youth workers for ministry to the children and youth during the week.

Charles planned, and submitted six months of Scripture texts and sermon titles to the newspaper. At the beginning, meetings with the church leadership were frequent and lengthy. Music was coordinated, the services redesigned, and changes made to the order of worship. Many hours were spent visiting members, listening to the joys and sorrows, and problems and triumphs of the members and building genuine relationships of concern. The pastoral care demands were high. The sick and shut-in members received Communion carried out to them; hours of Pastoral counseling were made available; training of leaders expanded; Charles commenced teaching on Christian Education; children and the young-at-heart were called to the front of the church during worship and spoken to in weekly Children’s messages; and the word was preached.

Charles taught Mid-week bible study and planned other occasions to celebrate and educate the congregation. As a church we started, gradually, to get together and talk together. We ate together, planned together, began to play together and laugh together.

With a small group of willing workers and meager offerings, God blessed our efforts. Church attendance started to raise dramatically, people young and old, including young couples with children and youth started to come and hear the preached word. They came for baptism as the Holy Spirit moved in their hearts and they yielded their lives to Christ. In a short while, Charles baptized two, then four, then eight, and then twelve, the church and the ministry grew. The teaching ministry, new members’ classes, Sunday school and Vacation Bible School expanded.

“God, send what we need,” was our prayer. A young minister, with a passion for youth ministry, came and joined the church with his wife and children. Charles prayed and invited him to become part of the ministry and lead the youth ministry. A woman came, a quite accomplished pianist, and she and her husband joined the church. They prayed together for weeks and Charles invited her to restart the church’s music ministry and choir.

There was great support and friendship from the priest and congregation of the local catholic parish, good relationships and exchanges with neighboring churches, and many opportunities to participate in ecumenical events. Invitations came for Charles to speak at local public forums, and opportunity to teach and to design a Student Assistance Program at the middle and high school came. We became part of the community.

Many students and adults who did not attend the church called me “Pastor.”  The giving increased, the church budget grew, the church’s nursery and pre-school filled up, the youth numbers increased and they started a ministry recording the worship services and sermons. Our calendars and time were full doing pre-marriage counseling, weddings, baby dedications and funerals regularly. To our knowledge, there was only one blatant incident of racism. A young couple came and was eager and excited about beginning pre-marriage counseling with us. Before the sessions began the intended bride’s mother called asking “if another minister could perform the wedding ceremony because my husband is prejudiced.”  The diaconate met and rejected their request, reaffirming that they had called and affirmed Charles as pastor and that they would not allow another minister, other than their pastor, to perform this couple’s wedding. The church became vital in the community.

We, by faith, had left family and friends and traveled to a new place. In a little under four years the New Hampshire church, and community, had embraced us and allowed Charles to become their pastor. We, and our children, were blossoming and happy. Charles preached, taught and challenged others to yield to Christ, to come and follow Christ, to be obedient to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

The bible studies, worship services, annual roll call suppers and potluck suppers, really served to bring us together with the people of the village of Belmont. After about a year and a half, Sarah decided that she could do a little more than hold the babies and wipe down counters. She had a degree in Business Finance, but with three children under four years old, did not want to go back to a full-time office job. The church had a nursery and pre-school as one of its ministries so she enrolled our children, helped in the church office and nursery and did financial and budget reports for the preschool. The church and ministry were growing, our children were thriving and we were content.