

Episode 3: Provewell Baptist Church: “When they throw it out you just return it.”

Music clip: Praise Service, Provewell Baptist Church, Sprott, Alabama, 10 March 2019

Beth McGinnis: I’m Beth McGinnis, and this is Hear in Alabama. Maybe I’ve mentioned that I’m a church organist in Birmingham, Alabama. Just saying it that way, that I’m a church organist, may conjure for you a particular kind of church music, and that mental image is probably not far from what we actually do at Vestavia Hills Baptist Church. I love my work there.

Music clip: “Holy, Holy, Holy,” Vestavia Hills Baptist Church congregation, Birmingham, Alabama, 16 June 2019

Beth: For the past two years, in March, our church has observed A Cappella Sunday. When my Minister of Music first told me about it, I thought all the singing would be unaccompanied but that I would still play service music. But he said there would be no instrumental accompaniment at all in the service, and that I could go get donuts if I wanted to.

Music clip: “Let Us Break Bread Together,” Vestavia Hills Baptist Church congregation, Birmingham, Alabama, 1 March 2020

Beth: I considered the donuts, but decided what I really wanted to do with my Sunday off was visit Provewell Baptist Church in Sprott, Alabama. I had heard about the powerful old style of singing they do there, and I wanted to hear it for myself.

Music clip: Praise Service, Provewell Baptist Church, Sprott, Alabama, 10 March 2019

Beth: Sprott is an unincorporated town in Perry County, northeast of Marion, at the intersection of Highways 183 and 14. At that crossroads is a general store and post office that was a community gathering place for more than a hundred years. There’s a picture of it in the Library of Congress, taken in the 1930s by Walker Evans for the book about Alabama sharecroppers *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, which Evans did with James Agee.

Provewell Baptist Church sits just a little farther down Highway 183 from the old post office. These two buildings let me know I’m in Sprott. I drive past a sunlit field and turn at the Provewell Baptist Church sign, into a long gravel drive lined with pine trees and a white picket fence. At the end of the drive is the white frame church building. It has two wings, the fellowship hall on the left and the sanctuary on the right. The sanctuary wing has white columns, white steps leading up to the front entrance, and a white steeple. There’s a cross above the entrance. A few deacons greet me warmly on the steps and usher me in. Since I’ve been driving, I want to use the restroom in the front lobby. It has flowers, framed quotations, and a clean, fresh smell that remind me of being in someone’s gracious home.

The first time I visited, I came with my husband. We arrived when Sunday School was still going on in the sanctuary. The wooden pews are covered with deep red fabric that echoes the red carpet, red choir robes, and red paraments on the pulpit and communion table. We settled into a pew near the back. That first Sunday in 2019 there were about thirty people there including me, my husband, and the choir. That was a big Sunday, Pastor Jerome Kirk's tenth anniversary.

Music clip: Communion Service, Reverend Jerome Kirk officiating, Provewell Baptist Church, Sprott, Alabama, 1 March 2020

Beth: I returned to Provewell in March of 2020, when my church again observed A Cappella Sunday. Between these visits, in the summer of 2019, I came back to Perry County and sat down with two of the church members. One of them, Mrs. Frances Ford, grew up in Perry County. The other, Dr. Pilar Murphy, is a relative newcomer. Both of these women have made immense contributions to the quality of life in Perry County. Mrs. Ford is the Director of Sowing Seeds of Hope, an organization dedicated to improving healthcare, housing, education, and spiritual renewal for the county's residents. Dr. Murphy is a pharmacy professor at Samford University, but she lives in Marion and goes to work every day at the Perry County Health Department, where she and her students conduct a Hypertension Clinic, health fairs, and other services. I have come to know Provewell Baptist Church through the lives of these two remarkable women. When we talked, Mrs. Ford told me a little of the church's history.

Frances Ford: There are some graves that have eighteen hundreds, as far as on the headstone. The church purchased the property from the Sprott family in July of 1901.

Beth: At first the church and school used the same building, but later the state built a two-room block building for the first-through-sixth-grade Provewell School. First through third grade was in one room, and fourth through sixth was in the other. Mrs. Ford went to that school.

Frances Ford: It was Provewell School, and then had Provewell Baptist Church all in our little community. And when the kids got to the seventh grade, they would go to Lincoln School and the bus would pick them up and the bus would carry them to Lincoln School. We would use the church yard; the church and the school kind-of shared a playground and the church yard was a kind of common area for both for both the school and the church. I can remember, O law, this makes me feel old. But I can remember when we would go to church when we were little and my dad was a deacon and we had a potbelly stove. And my dad would get there in the morning early so he could make a fire before everybody else came to church. And then we would sit around the fire until, until they get warmer you know. and we would get a bucket of water from the Overflowing Boat well, or either we would go up to Mrs. Dez's house behind the church and draw from the well. We would draw a bucket of water and then bring it so there would be water at the church and those were the kind of things we had to do in the morning before everybody got there, because my dad was a deacon. But it helps you have a love for that building. A love for that property and for that ground. Because it's just such a part of you.

Beth: Eventually the church building fell into disrepair, and the whole community came together to rebuild the church. Mrs. Ford's brothers, brother-in-law, and nephews were all involved. Members did the sanding, sheetrock, lights, and everything.

Frances Ford: We used wooden pegs because nails were so expensive back then, and it was so costly, so they would take, build the wooden pegs to hold the boards together.

Beth: Frances Ford's whole family was part of the church, but the whole church was like a family too.

Frances Ford: And we're more a family, the church, because everybody in that community were family. So we would all be at the church. And if something happened, it, when it affected one person, it affected everybody.

Beth: I asked Mrs. Ford about the choir at Provewell.

Beth McGinnis: Have you always sung in the choir?

Frances Ford: I have. And I have no voice. If I was like Pilar I would be singing from the rooftop.

Beth: Dr. Pilar Murphy is a relative newcomer to Provewell Baptist Church, but she has now become part of that close family.

Pilar Murphy: And so when I came down here, Mrs. Ford asked me if I knew how to play the piano. And I said, no, I don't know how to play the piano. She said, Well, do you sing? And I said, Yes, ma'am. So she was like, well, you should come and sing with us.

They are some of the friendliest people that I have ever met in my whole life. I mean, Mrs. Ford and her family have basically adopted me as part of their family.

Beth: Dr. Murphy grew up in a church in Arkansas that was a lot like Provewell.

Pilar Murphy: Well, I moved to Perry County in 2013 from North Little Rock, Arkansas. I have actually been in the church choir since I was about four years old when we used to go to church with my mom, and I wanted to sing so badly. But you had to be baptized before you could sing in the choir. So we started going to church with my grandmother every Sunday. And one of my older cousins, who was actually about the same age as my grandmother, she started a youth choir in order for us to be able to sing.

Because, see, when I was a little girl growing up, our youth choir, we sat on the front row. So we marched in, behind the regular...like we don't march in anymore. But a lot of Baptist churches do still march in and go to the choir stand. And so we would march in and we sat on the front row because, you know, back then. And we didn't have children's church and all of that. So we

learned and sang right along with everybody else. So those are the songs now that really have, to me, have the most meaning.

Beth: I asked Mrs. Ford and Dr. Murphy about the musical traditions at Provewell. You may remember my conversation with Lloyd Bricken in Episode 1. Lloyd told me how he had been captivated by old lined-out hymns in African American churches, and I played a clip of music so you could hear what lining out sounds like. That clip was from Provewell.

Frances Ford: And that's, they usually call, what they will call them is "Dr. Watts," but they are old hymns and that's what deacons do, and that's a tradition done in devotion.

Beth: Isaac Watts was a nineteenth-century hymn writer. His hymns are still sung in many churches, including mine, but they are especially beloved in African American churches. "Old Dr. Watts" refers to a slow, elaborate singing style in which a leader sings each line first and is then followed by the congregation--that's the "lining out" part. This style can be used in singing spirituals and other hymns in addition to those written by Isaac Watts.

Music clip: "A Charge to Keep I Have," Provewell Baptist Church, Sprott, Alabama, 10 March 2019

Frances Ford: Then they would take off on their first verse, and then we would follow on, but then we will moan during the hymn, as people are praying. We have a tendency to moan.

Beth: Mrs. Ford often visits other churches where the music is very different.

Frances Ford: We say the prayer, but we don't talk or say anything, whereas with us we kind of moan in singing the hymn and everything. When people are praying. It's kind of the African American tradition.

Beth: Dr. Murphy said the humming they do at Provewell is slightly different from the tradition she knew growing up.

Pilar Murphy: Here in Alabama, it's different when they sing one like they may say, "I love the Lord, He heard my cry" and they have this little, little. [hum] You hear the last part. We never grew up doing that in Arkansas. Ours just kind of flows a little bit faster, but you just kind of assimilate. So now we all, you know, we do the little hum part in the middle.

Music clip: Praise Service, Provewell Baptist Church, Sprott, Alabama, 10 March 2019

Pilar Murphy: Those are actually if you look it up they're called "Old Dr. Watts." I don't know if he's the one who came up with it. But then when I grew up that's what they called them was Dr. Watts. Those hymns. They are a particular set of hymns. But you'll hear them just about in every Baptist church around here. So they may throw out, the leader, it can be a deacon. It can be someone sitting out in the audience, but they'll throw out the verse and then the congregation picks it up. So, for example, if they say, "I love the Lord, He heard my cry," then, we come in with

"I love the Lord, He heard my cry." And then he comes back and throws out another one. And it's just kind of like a tossing and return. I mean, that's how church was even when I was a little girl like our old deacons, they would. And that's what we called it, they would throw out a hymn.

Pilar Murphy: When we say they throw it out. OK. You just return it. Yeah.

Beth McGinnis: Yeah. You've got to return whatever somebody throws out to you.

Pilar Murphy: Exactly. And so you'll hear like there is a lady in our choir, Miss Leola, looks like she always has a certain one that she throws out. And it's weird because like if she's not at church, nobody else throws it out like hers is. "Oh Lord Have Mercy" or something like that. But nobody else does it. Most of the time when she's not there.

Beth: Frances Ford explained the meaning behind the humming.

Frances Ford: That's our way of saying we agree with you. We want, we know what you're saying. It applies to me, too. Whereas, so I think that it's very emotional. It's like you. And sometimes you don't. You know, you listen to people praying. You say you'll have that motion. Have. You. Kind of that "want to" on to to sing or to moan. And then other times when people are praying. And it's just like you. You just agree with them. You just feel what they are feeling because you agree with them, then you sing, and, you may sing with them and moan during that or you might say amen or something while they're praying. Just to give them confirmation. you're really just saying I agree with you. I agree with the song. It is expressing what I feel. So I think that that's what you, when people are praying and they're talking about you pray for God to bless their children, you say amen because I say would you bless mine too.

Beth: When I spoke with Dr. Murphy, she let me play some of the recordings I had made at Provewell, and she explained the structure of their service to me.

Music Clip: "At the Cross," Provewell Baptist Church, Sprott, Alabama, 10 March 2019

Pilar Murphy: And so we have a morning hymn. And it changes every year. Like when he gives us a theme for the year, we usually have a church hymn for the year, and we'll sing the same hymn for the first Sunday. But then just throughout the month, sometimes he'll ask the choir. Like what hymn we want to sing or he'll come up with the hymn. Most Sundays Reverend Kirk comes up with the hymn. He has some favorites.

We'll sing something about, like, crucifixion or whatever first Sunday always.

Beth: Dr. Murphy explained that the praise service happens before the worship service proper, and there is music specific to the praise service.

Music clip: Praise Service, Provewell Baptist Church, Sprott, Alabama, 10 March 2019

Pilar Murphy: That's actually a praise service.

Beth McGinnis: So the deacons are leading this.

Pilar Murphy: Yes. That's why you hear a whole lot of off keys. [laughter] That's actually like an old hymn that one of the deacons threw out during the praise, praise and worship before church, it's like at the very beginning of church.

Beth McGinnis: Right. OK. And so that's that's an example of that. Throwing out the hymn.

Pilar Murphy: Yeah.

Beth McGinnis: And everybody joins.

Pilar Murphy: Exactly.

Beth McGinnis: Right.

Pilar Murphy: And because you see how slow it is as well.

Beth McGinnis: Yes.

Pilar Murphy: Those will be kind-of along the same lines as Negro spirituals, almost.

Beth McGinnis: OK. Because you could just in whatever setting you were in. You could throw it out and it could be answered.

Pilar Murphy: Exactly.

Beth: The service also includes solos and choir numbers. Dr. Murphy is the music director at Provewell and she also frequently sings the solos. She's been preparing for this her whole life.

Pilar Murphy: But those songs that I sang when I was a little girl and am still singing now, it's like they are just in my heart. I'll never forget them. I could have Alzheimer's and I would still know the words to that song.

Beth: We listened to a solo Dr. Murphy had sung in the Provewell service.

Music clip: "There Is a Name," Pilar Murphy, Provewell Baptist Church, Sprott, Alabama, 10 March 2019

Beth McGinnis: And I think it was just you.

Pilar Murphy: It was a solo. Reverend Kirk just loves to call on me to sing a solo.

Beth McGinnis: How do you feel about that?

Pilar Murphy: I just have to stay prepared. Now, I have a Bible and I normally will just write songs in the very back of it, like songs that I might be sitting in church sometimes and a song will just be on my heart. And I'll jot it down or a song that I'm thinking about singing for something. So if I can't think of anything, I usually just look at the back of my Bible and there's always something. Yeah, it's one of those. Be ye also ready. To you. I do. I'm normally ready.

And it's usually weird because some Sunday mornings, even though he does, he will not call me and say, I want you to sing a song for me today. But some Sundays I wake up and I just know you need to get something ready. So I'll be at home, just kind of humming something or whatever, and then when I get to church. I already know. So sometimes because he'll just turn round from the pulpit and be like, come on, sing that song. And you just get on up and sing the song.

Pilar Murphy: You see we sing a lot, too, don't we?

Which we normally will sing at least two during praise service. Then we sing the morning hymn. Uh-Huh. Then we sing during offering. Uh-Huh. The choir does two selections. We sing during altar call. We yeah. We have the song after the sermon which we normally don't rehearse for because we try to come up with something that goes along with the sermon.

Beth McGinnis: That makes sense.

Pilar Murphy: And then we sing the closing song. So. Yeah. Yeah. That's a lot of songs.

Beth McGinnis: It's so that the music really leads the service doesn't it?

Beth: I played a clip from the end of the Provewell service.

Music clip: Invitation, Provewell Baptist Church, Sprott, Alabama, 10 March 2019

Pilar Murphy: But the song that we sing after the sermon, the discipleship song is usually a slower song, and you're really trying to prick people's heart for them to be able to take the message.

Pilar Murphy: Because in the Bible, the Levites were the singers, they were the singers unto the Lord and they fought battles. And you think they would send the choir out before to set the ground? To set the stage. And there were times when all they had to do was send the choir out and the battle was won. And so for us, that's what we look at our role. Our role is to set the stage and to prime people's heart to break up those hard hearts, so that when the word goes forth, and he's planting that seed, the heart has already been broken some so that those seeds can fall on good ground. The last thing we want you to do is hear a wonderful sermon. But then when you leave a church, it didn't make a difference in your life. And so we want that song to go along with the sermon. To almost seal it, in your heart.

Beth: Earlier in our conversation Dr. Murphy told me about “Old Dr. Watts” hymns that are part of the African-American tradition. Many, but not all of these are by the hymn writer Isaac Watts, and they’re sung in a highly embellished style. Often a deacon or another church member will start the hymn and everyone else will follow along. They call this “throwing out” a hymn. When someone throws out a hymn, everyone else picks it up.

ProveWell is the kind of community where everyone picks up what everyone else throws out, and I don’t just mean music. The hymns, scriptures, and people are sustaining and life-giving for every member.

This kind of community doesn’t just happen. It’s built into the human structure of the church, just as intentionally as the community built the church building in the early 1900s. Dr. Murphy told me how the church deacons lead devotion and communion, and also about a group of women in the church called the “Mother Board.” Many of these leaders grew up in the church, including Mrs. Frances Ford.

Pilar Murphy: Most of our Motherboard have been at ProveWell their whole life.

Beth McGinnis: So the Motherboard? Tell me about that. What’s that?

Pilar Murphy: The Motherboard is usually I think you have to be at least 65 to be a mother of the church. And it’s very similar to being an elder, like a deacon, but they don’t have to go through all the training. But their whole goal, like they usually will prepare communion and help with communion. They help make sure that the table is spread. They’re the ones who always tell the children, like you do not touch that table when it’s set for communion. But they also help with counseling like young women in our church. Sister King, like I said, she’s in her 80s, she is such an encourager and she takes her role as a. We call her THE Mother of the church because she has been there her whole life. But when she stands up, she just imparts wisdom. You will see on like on the first Sunday. They always wear white. When I was growing up, our Mothersboard, they would wear white everything. I’m talking about, my grandma was. They were so into it. It was like even your undergarments had to be white. On first Sunday, they always wore white stockings, white shoes. Now you don’t see it as strict anymore. But they still. They usually will have their heads covered during communion. It’s just really a sacred time. But they are like a counterpart to the deacons in the church.

Beth: To hear Dr. Murphy and Mrs. Ford talk about ProveWell, you might think they are in church vocations, but they aren’t, at least not exactly. I spoke with them in Dr. Murphy’s workplace at the Perry County Health Department, where she and her pharmacy students from Samford University run the Cardiovascular Risk Reduction Clinic for Perry County residents. This clinic is a partnership between Samford’s McWhorter School of Pharmacy and the non-profit organization Sowing Seeds of Hope, which Mrs. Ford started to improve the quality of life and work for everyone in Perry County. Both women describe their work as a mission.

Pilar Murphy: So we have a hypertension clinic. It's actually the cardiovascular risk reduction clinic. But we call it the hypertension clinic. So patients can come in and the services that we provide are free. So we monitor them for cardiovascular risk factors, diabetes, obesity. So anything that could contribute to heart disease. We talk to the patients about their medication. We monitor their blood pressure if it's high. We counsel them on if they're non compliant or which one of their meds could be causing different issues. And we treat it like an office visit with a provider. So I have students who normally will come down. They rotate in clinic with me.

It's a mission, and we treat it as such. So the mission and the vision of Sowing Seeds of Hope is to serve the "least of these." And so a lot of our patients don't have insurance. They may be under insured. They don't really know how to navigate through the healthcare system. And we get to help them do that and try to help them have better outcomes. And we're just basically seeing what we can do to help make their lives better.

Beth: Frances Ford told me how she had wanted to become a missionary in Africa. She remembers driving home to Perry County from a meeting of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in Birmingham. The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship is a partnership among baptist churches. Both Provewell and my own church, Vestavia Hills Baptist in Birmingham, belong to the CBF. The meeting was at my church, Vestavia Hills Baptist. Mrs. Ford drove home in a thunderstorm, and she prayed the whole time. She told me her conversation with God that night was just like the one she and I were having, sitting face to face. She said God showed her that night during the thunderstorm that there was plenty of work for her to do in Perry County. She didn't have to go to Africa.

Mrs. Ford has not gone to Africa, but she has seen the world in Perry County.

Both Frances Ford and Pilar Murphy see their work as their mission, their ministry. But their singing is a ministry too:

Pilar Murphy: We're not standing just singing, but we truly are a ministry and sometimes not even to you, but to ourselves. It's a vital role in the church. You really have to take this seriously. And if it's not, it's not about how you sound like. Because we mess with Mrs. Ford all the time. Because we are. We told her she can't rock and clap at the same time. She is the epitome of making a joyful noise. It really is. We always have to put her in between two people to make sure she stays on because the right way. Yeah. Make sure she's on the right key. But she is. It's all about for real. Making a joyful noise and joyful noise is what really reaches God's heart and if it reaches God's heart, you know, it's going to touch other people.

Pilar Murphy: But those songs that I sang when I was a little girl and I'm still singing now, it's just like they are a part of me.

Beth: I think they're becoming a part of me, too, and I don't just mean the music. I wouldn't call myself a "young woman," but the second time I went to Provewell I definitely experienced the

kind of counseling and even mothering that Pilar told me the MotherBoard does. After the service that day I spoke with the pastor's wife, Mrs. Janice Kirk. I had met her before, but this time we connected over our children. Her daughter had just finished college at Auburn University, where my son wanted to go. I was uncertain how things were going to work out, and Mrs. Kirk gave me encouragement, comfort, and practical advice that turned my spirits around that day. It was the kind of encounter I've had just about every time I've gone to Perry County: I go to learn about the music and the people there, but I come away having been cared for in a very personal way. Thank you, Mrs. Kirk. My son is off to Auburn this fall, where he'll play in the marching band.

And marching bands are the subject of the next episode. We'll hear from the two public schools in Perry County, their amazing marching bands, and their dedicated band directors.

HEAR in Alabama is produced by me, Beth McGinnis, and oral historian Michelle Little. Want to hear more fascinating human stories or even tell your own? Check out Michelle's oral history company akousate. That's "a-k-o-u-s-a-t-e dot com." We're supported by a grant from the Alabama Humanities Foundation.

The church music was from my church, Vestavia Hills Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, and you also heard the church choir of Provewell Baptist Church in Sprott, Alabama, pastor Reverend Jerome Kirk. The soloists are Brenda Heard and Dr. Pilar Murphy, the pianist is Mr. Arnold Dobyne and the drummer is Devine Guice.

My entire interviews with Mrs. Frances Ford and Dr. Pilar Murphy are available on my website, hearinalabama.com. That's "h-e-a-r in alabama dot com."

I'm Beth McGinnis, and this is "Hear in Alabama."

Music clip: End of Praise Service, Provewell Baptist Church, Sprott, Alabama, 10 March 2019