

Narrator: Welcome to UMC.org Profiles, where each month we share the spiritual journey of a United Methodist.

This month on UMC.org Profiles, Kenneth Wyatt, retired pastor and accomplished artist, shares his faith story.

Kenneth Wyatt's spiritual journey mirrors his own life lesson to "stay within the will of the Father." At the age of 14, Kenneth was first called to ministry, licensed as a local pastor, then appointed to a local church in central Texas ... all within the span of two weeks.

At the direction of that same calling, he found himself 30 years later, pursuing a new ministry in art. Known for his Western and religious-based art, you can now find Kenneth Wyatt paintings displayed throughout the world in churches of all denominations ... sharing the Word of God to all that view.

Kenneth: We were always a part of the church through my grandmother and grandfather on my mother's side. There were several ministers on that side of the family. And so they all said, Someday Kenneth'll be a preacher. There's no doubt about that. Everybody had me tabbed from the beginning 'cause I guess I talked too much...but, ah...or maybe talked enough.

It was in my early teens that I began to feel this...this call to the ministry. I was supposed to preach the gospel. I went to church camp one summer in my early teens and listened to some people out of the seminary that came and spoke to the church camp. And I was so impressed that I went home and I knew God had laid a call on my life for something special. I saw the District Superintendent in town that night.

I went down and sat down by him in the café, and said, I know who you are and I want to ask you a question. How do you get to be a preacher anyway. And he begin to tell me the steps that you had to go....

My father was on the board of stewards at the church. And I got his list and called all the people and they met me down at the church the next morning. They passed my character and approved my call. Took me before the church conference at noon. And we did that. And it passed again. We went before the quarterly conference that afternoon. We had more of my kinfolks than anybody else there. So they just passed me again. I went to annual conference about 2 weeks later and the bishop stood up for me.

I got home 'bout two weeks later. I had become 15 in that period of time. And my bishop called, Bishop William Senior, called me and said, This is the war years, you know. And all the men have gone off to the service. Would you consider holding down a little church out in the country there by your...by your home.

And I said, Yes. And they moved me out on this little five-point circuit. And I was in the preaching business and stayed in the preaching business for the next 30 years.

... as just a teenager and holding a church, life was a little bit different, a little strange, I suppose, for me. I did graduate at a very early age and went on to college and found out that the girls didn't want to go with me because I was just too young. College girls just don't go with boys that are still 15 years old. So my social life was a disaster.

Well, couple of years off in the Navy did move my social life and social career up a little bit. And when I came back and started to go back to school, I went to a little college down in Abilene, Texas, a Methodist school down there by the name of McMurray, and met the lady of my life there, Veda Mae. And she was from a little country town named Wellington. And I courted her and had no idea that she'd ever say Yes to me. But when we got married and entered into the ministry it was just like that was exactly what we were supposed to do.

I guess a lot of people wonder how you get from being a preacher and...and get over into the art world. Well, it was a real simple thing. Thirty years after I had started preaching, I was standing in the pulpit... Now I felt a call to preach when I was young.

I thought you were called forever to do something. And I'm right in the middle of a sermon, maybe about, you know, hour and a half, hour and 45 minutes into it, just about halfway through. And my mind played tricks on me. I thought I heard words. I'm sure it was not an audible sound, but it sounded that way to me. In my heart and in my mind I heard it. It said, Kenneth, you know this is not where I want you. It scared me to death. I didn't know what I was supposed to be doing. I thought I was supposed to be preaching. And it was a little difficult to finish the sermon.

Well, about 2 or 3 weeks after that I was at a banquet up at a little town in the Texas panhandle called Perryton. And I was doing the Chamber of Commerce annual banquet. I was doing the speaking. And after it was over with a man came up to me and he said, My name is Ben Franklin. Well, I knew it wasn't the original one, but it was a descendent of his. And he had a business called the Knife and Fork Clubs of America.

He said, We don't normally have preachers as our speakers because, why would you want to pay six, seven hundred dollars on Thursday night to hear him when you could get him for nothing on Sunday morning. But he said, We want you on our circuit. The only other preacher they had was Norman Vincent Peale.

Well, obviously this must have been the answer. Suddenly to call away and to go on this circuit as a speaker. I went to the bishop, explained the situation to him. He gave me a year of Sabbatical leave and I went off speaking on tour for the Knife and Fork Clubs. Enjoyed it thoroughly. Had a big success doing it. They signed me up for a second year.

Well, by the end of the second year, I had started to paint. And the paintings were already selling for more than I was making on the speaking tour. I think I spoke about a 130-40 times that year. And I just switched over and started to paint.

I never shall forget. I was in Dallas, speaking at a banquet. And the great portrait painter, Dimitri Vail, had come to the banquet. They were presenting one of his paintings. The banquet was to honor a man that had been president of the company there for several years. And they were paying me to come down and speak as the after-dinner speaker and paying Mr. Vail to do a portrait of the man to give him as a retirement gift. And we were sitting together at the head table. And we kind of fell in love with each other. I looked at his paintings. I couldn't believe anybody could do that. And he listened to my speaking and he loved what I had to say. And we talked back and forth for a while. And I...I was rather nervous and I remember I was drawing something there on the napkin or the tablecloth with my pen. I was waiting for my turn to speak and he looked over and.... I'll be honest with you. It was a picture of a mule. And he said, You...you're good. You're an artist, too. And I said, No, no. And he said, Well, you oughta be. You have talent. So he took me out to his home after it was over with and we looked at all of his art. And he convinced me I really probably ought to try painting. I got some brushes and paints and stretcher strips and canvas. And got off the plane out at Lubbock after...after the dinner was over and went home and my wife said, What is all this? And I said, Well, it's art supplies. I'm gonna paint a painting.

I took some back to Mr. Vail. He said, Go home and paint. That's what you need to do. You need to paint. I took some out into New Mexico and showed them to one of the great artists out there. He looked at them and said, Go home and paint. All you have to do is practice. Said, Just paint, paint, paint. Well, I started to paint and I painted...probably painted a couple of hundred paintings and took them by a gallery one day and they suggested that it would be

a good idea if I left them there. They might want to sell some. And I did. Came back and they had sold one or two. And I took them over to another gallery and they said, Boy, these are.... Leave these here; we want to study these. And I said, Okay. And I left them there for a while and they called me and they said, We're gonna have an art auction. Would you like to put these paintings in the auction?

I had about 13...14 paintings. He had asked me if...said, Couldn't you paint a horse? I said, Sure; I'm a west Texas. Of course I can paint a horse. Never had, but I figured I could. So I painted three horse paintings to put in the auction. And time we got to the horse paintings, the bidding was really going up and people were grabbing 'em and running with 'em. And even though these were wet, they bought them and left them there to hang on the wall until they dried. And sold for several hundred dollars apiece. So I never really was a starving artist. I...I'd been a starving preaching, but I never had been a starving artist before.

Well, some of the Hollywood people began to buy my art. And some of the really famous ones bought some of it. One of them was Festus, the old boy off of Gunsmoke show—Ken Curtis by professional name.

He just loved what I did. And I was sharing this idea of why God...I didn't know why God wanted me to paint horses. And he said, I'll tell you what. You stay paintings horses and cowboys and you'll finally get to preach all the gospel you want to in places you never thought would be available to you. And, you know, that's proved to be a really good statement.

I fooled around a little bit with painting paintings that had a Christian theme in it. But not necessarily just right scriptural or anything.

And then suddenly I found myself in a position one time to be with the church when the Foundation for Evangelism came to me, through Charles Kendrick. And he came to solve a problem they had. As the Foundation for Evangelism they were trying to get a chair of evangelism at one of the seminaries. And they didn't have enough funds.

I said,

Why don't I paint a painting and we'll sell it. And all the proceeds of the print, that we make off of it, will go into the church. So I painted this large painting depicting the beginning of the

Methodist Church when Wesley and Coke first...when Wesley first sent Coke over to America after the Revolutionary War to start the church over here.

And that's what it started was with this one painting of Offer Them Christ. And we took it off to a...to the General Conference ...

And they put us a big picture in Post Magazine. And got a lot of publicity off of it. And we raised a lot of money with it.

So we came up with a new idea and that was the painting of the Twelve Apostles.

So it made 14 in all. And those.... We sold those...the prints off of those. And put those in the churches across America.

You know, as I think about what I'm trying to put down on canvas, sometimes it's an emotion; sometimes it's an idea. But I'll have to go back to what I said in the beginning, mainly I'm trying to stay within the will of the father. I...I think that's the secret of life. I...I remember when I was a boy. I wanted to stay within the will of my earthly father, too. And punishment was always there. But that really wasn't the main thing. I just didn't want to disappoint him. I didn't want to discourage him. I wanted to do the best I could so he'd be proud of me. And I think this has...has gone over into the religious part of my life as well. And I hope that's the way we raised my son and my daughters—they wanted to stay within the will of the father. It...it's the easy way to live. You don't have to.... It's sort of like going to class unprepared. It's better if you go prepared. Then you enjoy the class. Otherwise you sit there afraid somebody's gonna call on you.

Narrator: Our thanks to Kenneth Wyatt for sharing his faith story with us.

This month's profile was produced by Matt Carlisle; interview by Tom McAnally; editor was Lane Denson. I'm Hilly Hicks and Profiles is brought to you by UMC.org, the official online ministry of The United Methodist Church, a ministry of United Methodist Communications.