

FaithLife Stories: Sade Olanipekun-Lewis

Folasade (Sade) Olanipekun-Lewis and her twelve year old daughter Yemi live in West Mt Airy and have been members of OMC since 2014. Sade recently joined American Airlines, Inc. where she serves as the Regional Director of Government and Airport Affairs.

I am originally from Brooklyn, New York, a true “Brooklyn girl.” My parent met in New York having immigrated there in the late '60s. My father was a lapsed Muslim from Nigeria and my mother was a Catholic from Jamaica. She made decisions about religion in the family, so my brother and I attended St. Agnes School until 6th grade. I had been baptized, had my First Holy Communion and was getting ready for Confirmation when my father moved us to Nigeria upon my parent’s separation. This was an event I did not know was being planned until we arrived in Lagos, the country’s capital January 1978 and where I lived for the next almost seven years.

My father moved back home because he was looking for a support system to raise his young children and sought that in his extended family. He also wanted to care for his mother who had become widowed the year before. My father was the second born in long line of siblings and according to his tribe’s culture – he was of the Yoruba tribe – he was the family patriarch because his father and older brother had died. But because my father had married outside of the tribe, my brother and I were considered half cast; in the 1970s there were social stigmas associated with being of mixed heritage. While my brother, because he was male, had an easier time being accepted into the family it was not the same for me because I challenged cultural mores, which during that time were at the cross roads of modernity and long standing traditions I was a 12 year old blue jeans-wearing American kid from Brooklyn dropped into a patriarchal society that struggled with the traditions of an ethos long held fast by its forefathers, but at the same time challenged by the influences of a western culture that was permeating an emerging country barely two decades into its independence from colonial rule.

At one-time and still today, certain African culture, including that of my father’s, did not believe in educating the female child beyond certain elementary grades. The conventional wisdom was that when a girl achieved puberty she would be of marrying age. Contrarily and to the consternation of many family members, my father firmly believed in education for all children regardless of gender and age. He also wanted me to continue my faith journey that began at birth, so I began and completed my secondary education at Maryland Comprehensive Secondary School, a Catholic school run by the Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Apostles, an international group of Religious Sisters.

My father’s family was of the Muslim faith, yet by the time I had moved to Nigeria, about a third had converted to Christianity. Consequently, on Fridays one aunt would take me to the mosque for Jumu'ah, a congregational ṣalāt (prayer), and on Sundays another would take me to Mass. Growing up in Nigeria, my experience was that the relation between religions was very respectful. It was not unusual to see a mosque right next to a church on a city street. My relatives didn’t see a conflict in going to both the mosque and the church, although you were not supposed to marry outside your religion, in addition to your tribe. Later, inter-faith unions became accepted as tradition evolved. Today, the pendulum seems to have shifted back with people looking at their differences more than their similarities. It saddens me.

Having been exposed to different cultures and religions made me learn very early on that regardless of where we come from or to whom we pray, we all have the fundamental basic wants and needs – a safe place in which to live our faith, contribute to our society, raise our kids, and leave the world better than when we entered it.

Although I had challenges as a young girl living my formative years in Nigeria, I came to understand the heritage of my forefathers and that experience grounded me in ways that have shaped my beliefs and life sensibilities. This gift of culture and custom became a profound cornerstone in the foundation of me as I came to learn of language, food, stories and all that come with one's heritage. No experience was more powerful than walking the village of my father's people, meeting my great aunt and other relatives. This was the long line of ancestry who came from the earth on which they lived, from which they drew sustenance and to which they would eventually return.

I returned to the U.S. when I was 18 to pursue my post-secondary education. During college, I lapsed out of my catholic faith and wondered around for several years with no ties to any church. I looked for connections elsewhere, having joined a Unitarian church, dabbled in Buddhism, or just did nothing at all. When I relocated to Philadelphia to begin graduate studies, I joined New Covenant Church for several years and even served on their Finance Committee, and Schools Committee. I then followed some of the same parishioners to a Pentecostal-like church, but soon realized that this was not the spiritual journey I was seeking- something was missing.

At this time, I was in my mid-thirties and decided to locate to Birmingham, Alabama to continue my career as a public finance professional in local government. I returned to Philadelphia three years later and married my daughter's father, who was also of the Catholic faith and like me had left the church. In fact, my former husband and I were not married in the church but by a justice of the peace. Even though we were not at the time practicing Catholics, we had comparable values all born of our faith upbringing.

After our daughter, Yemi, was born, I began to give serious thought about my faith and the type of journey I wanted for my child and felt the tug of my religion call, not just for my child but for me as well. I had not felt this way in decades. It surprised me because I was certain that I was never coming back to the faith of my youth. She was the most powerful influence on my return to the church and my nascent adult faith walk.

At first, I felt ambivalent about returning to Church, but we joined OMC when my daughter started at Norwood Fontbonne Academy to give her faith structure. Watching her faith journey unfold, I then started really thinking about mine. I recognized that the foundation poured into me in my Catholic childhood never went away. Yemi was a catalyst for me to reexamine my life, especially when she asked me why I had never been confirmed. As I watch my daughter be baptized by the Holy Spirit, commune with the body and blood of Christ through First Holy Communion, and walk with her as she prepared to be Confirmed, I realized that I was not to return to the faith of my youth, but rather be present and open to the faith of my adulthood.

Going through my own Confirmation process was a very pivotal and catalytic experience. There had been no intimacy with God in my earlier formation. But I have learned that prayer is a conversation with God and I now have that conversation all the time. What had been a rote process as a child is now a living reality. I feel far less ambiguous about my faith and welcome this renewed relationship I have with God. I have started making connections in the understanding of my faith that were not there before.

I welcome that my daughter's journey is so different from my own at her age. She is so much more aware and present, which has caused me to do the same. Her outlook is based on faith, especially her sense of right and wrong. It reminds me that our Nigerian tribal ancestors also had a very spiritualized view of the world. And now my daughter has come to that through a Catholic Christian perspective.