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THE WORD MADE FLESH

Tattoos as a spiritual practice among young adults

BY KELSEY DALLAS

With Toms shoes and a mop of brown hair, Adam Quine is every bit the image of a young pastor. A recent graduate of Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Quine was called to serve First Presbyterian Church of Lincoln, Illinois, when he was 28.

Quine's story mirrors that of many 20- and 30-somethings in Presbyterian pews today. Though raised in the church, he says he didn't really understand the beauty of it until his early 20s. Serving as youth director for a congregation in Owensboro, Kentucky, Quine started to sense a call to ministry in the midst of a difficult, transformative season. He emerged from the experience as a newly enrolled seminary student, his relationship to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) feeling as fresh as the ink in his new tattoo.

"It's of the Chi-Rho," Quine says, gesturing to his wrist, where the superimposed Greek letters form a monogram of Christ (see top, left

photo). "I always liked that symbol, despite it being Constantine's deal. It was how Christians recognized each other. I got this symbol to indicate where my identity begins."

For many young church members and leaders, tattooing is a spiritual practice uniquely suited for the contemporary age. For Quine, it's an opportunity to show that his relationship to God and the church is as real as the Chi-Rho on his wrist.

"I think people want authenticity in the church," he says. "If a tattoo is saying, 'This is who I am,' then that can only help."

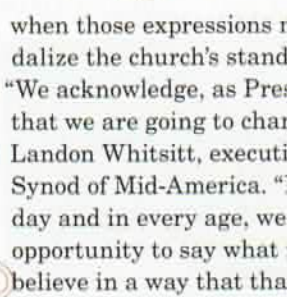
Tattoos are quickly becoming the marker of an entire generation. Pew Research Center's 2010 study on millennials reported that nearly 4 in 10 young adults have a tattoo, with half of the tattooed having two to five. People are flocking to tattoo parlors for these permanent accessories, choosing to ink themselves with the markers of their identity, as Quine would describe them.

"Some folks might think it's a bit of a rebellion or a wild stage," Quine says. "But young adults are thinking of tattooing as more of a form of expression or a piece of art." He describes his tattoo as a tangible way to honor the growing he did during his three years in Owensboro, a way to embody the hope that sustained him during a period of confusion.

"It's kind of like a scar in some way," Quine explains. "I've never broken a bone. I've never had surgery. I have no scars to tell a story with, but I have this tattoo."

The Confession of 1967 states, "In every age, the church has expressed its witness in words and deeds as the need of the time required." It's a sentiment cherished by a church that strives to live with a Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.

Born of the Reformation, Presbyterians believe in evolving expressions of personal faith, even



when those expressions might scandalize the church's standard-bearers. "We acknowledge, as Presbyterians, that we are going to change," says Landon Whitsitt, executive of the Synod of Mid-America. "In every day and in every age, we have an opportunity to say what it is that we believe in a way that that day and age understands."

The problem of what counts as proper self-expression, however, is hard to solve. With tattoos established in mainstream culture, Christians across the country are asked to consider whether tattooed Bible passages and crosses count the same as sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In his book *Earthen Vessels: Why Our Bodies Matter to Our Faith*, author Matthew Anderson asks believers to consider the theological significance of a tattoo culture that presents a sacred symbol as one choice among many. Anderson's worry that young adults are making Jesus a brand to consume prompts the question of whether the value of religious tattoos is only skin deep.

Tattoo artist Andrew "Zee" Sistrand agrees that religious tattoos often are as much about the tattoo as they are about the religious belief. "Religion is just an acceptable topic to tattoo for some people," he said. "For kids getting their first tattoo, their parents may be more accepting of the idea of a cross."

Whitsitt, however, isn't willing to write off tattoos. Although he agrees that increased social acceptability means more young adults can experiment with the medium, his own time in the tattoo parlor taught him to take seriously the spiritual aspects of tattooing.

Whitsitt, who became famous for both his tattoo of the PC(USA) seal and his election to the role of vice-moderator at the 219th General Assembly (2010), calls his body art "the most personal, testimonial thing" he has done in his life, beyond

giving himself to his wife and family (see top, center photo on page 32). He describes his tattoo as his own way to tie himself to his "tribe" of Presbyterian people.

"As I was getting inked, I repeated over and over again in my brain the words that pastors say after they baptize a person. I felt like I was marking myself as Christ's own forever," Whitsitt says. "To me, my tattoo is a reminder that, regardless of what I think or feel about my relationship with God at any particular moment, God has already claimed me."

Experiences like Whitsitt's are increasingly cited by a scholarly community seeking to understand the rise in tattooing over the last three decades. Margo DeMello, author of *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community* and the forthcoming *Inked: Tattoos and Body Art around the World*, explains that tattoos have become a meaningful method of self-expression during an age when people's stories define them. "Our culture is so narrative-based, so personal identity-based, so self-reflective," she says. "Tattoos are now seen as a physical expression of yourself and your soul."

In her work, DeMello has traced the tattoo's journey from a mark of the marginalized to its current prominence in American culture. "Tattoos are being used by individuals to discuss their personal journeys and their accomplishments," she says. As body art gained traction among the middle class in the United States, the tattoo became the medium through which people put their self-understanding on display.

And yet, DeMello adds, tattooing also is becoming highly communal. With so many Americans getting inked, it is no longer surprising to meet someone with the same designs. "In the West, we see tattoos in an individualistic way," she says. "In most cultures, that's not the case. Tattoos are a sign of affiliation

showing that you are a member of a tribe."

DeMello, who has multiple tattoos, believes that religious leaders should take seriously those young adults willing to mark their bodies with symbols of the church. "I guess I just feel like an expression of faith on the body is permanent, and it's personal, and it's a show of love," she says. "Who is someone else to question that?"

But these tattooed young adults aren't just looking for acceptance; they seek a worshiping community that invites people to tell their stories. Body art is one form of expression, but art, dance, prayer, spoken word, and the sacraments all have their place.

Many young adults are eager to tell inquiring minds about the meaning behind their tattoos. They await opportunities in small groups and worship services to discuss their vision of spirituality in the 21st century. Others might not want to speak publicly or be singled out, so it's important for conversations to start naturally in a context that encourages all people (not just those with tattoos) to share their faith stories.

In the meantime, though, acceptance is certainly appreciated.

Quine says he hasn't encountered any pushback from his congregation about his tattoo, but he is waiting until he is more established in his role before he gets a second one.

Quine rejoices in a church that accepts him because of shared beliefs and treasured traditions, a community that doesn't get hung up on an inch and a half of black ink. As the Confession of 1967 notes, ours is a church that "disperses to serve God wherever its members are," whether in First Presbyterian's pews or a tattoo parlor.

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