



Father Steve Kluge's "Crooked Line" Leads To St. Joseph's

By Evelyn Beck

On July 1, Father Stephen Kluge, OFM, arrived in Anderson and recently was appointed as the pastor of St. Joseph's. It's the latest stop on a journey full of surprises.

The eldest of five, Steve (as he prefers to be called) grew up on the New Jersey coast in Point Pleasant. His dad commuted two hours each way to his job as a manufacturing plant supervisor; in his last position, he made Selectric typewriter ribbons. Steve was just out of college when his dad died of a heart attack at age 46 and his mom went to work at a bank operations center to support the family.

All of them, including Steve's dad, a convert to Catholicism, were very involved in their parish, which was run by Conventual Franciscans, one of the three branches of the First Order of St. Francis. After high school, Steve attended St. Francis College in Loretto, Pennsylvania, for a degree in elementary education and was hired to teach fifth grade in Asbury, N.J. "I lasted two years," he said. "I was awful. You have to discover what you are meant to teach. It's more than just subject matter."

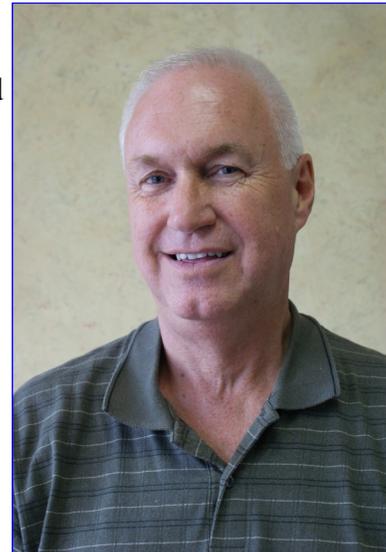
Then came a series of positions, including stints in a department store and in the gift shop at Disney World's Epcot. His favorite, by far, was working as a nurse's aide at the state psychiatric hospital, providing hands-on care such as feeding and bathing for about 20 dementia patients. "I loved that job," said Steve. When his mom asked how he could bear such work, he replied, "If I don't do that, who's going to?"

Still, he felt that God was calling him to something else, and he entered the Friars for the first time. But as with his

initial teaching job, the timing wasn't right, and he left after a year and a half to return to the psychiatric hospital. Eventually, he found his way to the Bronx, where he once again taught fifth grade, but this time he recognized his ministry. "It was to tell the students who they are," he said, and he and his class began every day by stating, "I am good, holy and special." He spent two years with the fifth-graders and another five years in the seventh and eighth grades, teaching literature and social studies.

During this time, he continued to seek spiritual direction, and one Christmas, he found it. At a party in the gym, while he was standing under the basketball net, a group of eighth-grade girls approached and told him he needed to return to the Friars. "They could see something clearly that I'd been struggling with; it was a message," said Steve, who asked God to send another message so he could be sure. When a nun also urged his return, he knew what he was meant to do. "It was the right time," he said. "I knew what my ministry would be—to tell people who they are."

His initial plan was to study and then



Father Steve Kluge

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A Turning Point

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return to teaching. Never did he intend to become a priest. He spent a year of postulancy, two months learning Spanish in Bolivia, three years of study at Washington Theological Union in Washington, D.C., and three mission summers before spending an internship year at St. Francis of Assisi on Long Beach Island, N.J.

A turning point there occurred when he encountered a crying woman who said that another priest wouldn't give her absolution because she didn't know the Act of Contrition in Latin. Outraged, Steve spoke to another priest, who sent him to the beach to calm down and to reflect and pray. Sitting on that beach, Steve said, "I realized that I was asking the wrong question. It was not 'Should I get ordained?' but 'How can I best serve?' That's the question God wanted me to ask. And the best way I could serve was to be ordained."

After his ordination, Steve was assigned to St. Francis as pastor in 2001. "It was a long journey," he said. "Looking back, it was inevitable, but God is patient. When you're walking a crooked line, God uses that."

He was at St. Francis when Hurricane Sandy hit in 2012, and the experience affected him deeply. He evacuated with everyone else before the superstorm hit in October and was

not able to move back until the Wednesday before Christmas and not able to open the church—which had taken on two feet of water—until mid-June. "There was the physical wreckage of the buildings," he said. "But the emotional and spiritual wreckage of being displaced was worse." He held his first Mass after the storm at nearby St. Mary's. "I don't know how people knew we were having Mass," he said. "But the church was packed. By the opening hymn, I was bawling my eyes out. During the homily, I broke down again to see everybody." That was one of those times in his life when he felt that he was truly living the Franciscan mission: "We are called to recognize our own leprosy and from that place to reach out," he said. And he understood in a new and profound way that being a pastor was not a job but a relationship.

After nine years at St. Francis and the trauma of the hurricane, Steve knew it was time to move on. He spent a six-week sabbatical in Tokyo ministering to English-speaking expatriates; a 30-day silent retreat in Honolulu, Hawaii; a month in Danville, California; and two weeks at the friars' Mother House in New York City. This period allowed him to complete a two-part article, "Superstorm Sandy: A Time of Beatitude," which was published in HNP Today, a blog produced by the Franciscan Friars of Holy Name Province.

This summer, encouraged by long-time friend Brother Henry Fulmer, Steve arrived in Anderson, the "crooked line" of his journey leading him to St. Joseph's.

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You can read Father Stephen Kluge's two-part story about "Superstorm Sandy: A Time of Beatitude" online. Part 1: <http://www.hnp.org/reflection-superstorm-sandy-time-beatitude/>. Part 2: <http://www.hnp.org/reflection-living-superstorm-aftermath/>.