

# Rev. Douglas Frank Strickland

2000 — Present

**Douglas Franklin Strickland** was born April 5, 1955, in Anderson, South Carolina, the only child of Douglas Keith Strickland and Margaret Gennelle Reeves. Frank was raised in Belton, a textile town. He graduated from Belton-Honea Path High School in 1973 and Newberry College in 1978. His mother came from a large family, five brothers and five sisters, while his father had only one sister.



Frank did not attend seminary directly after college, working instead in a variety of vocational settings: trucking, psychiatric, construction, and educational. Such vocational diversity brought with it equally diverse relationships: children, adolescents, adults, elderly, professionals, non-professionals, healthy, and handicapped.

While visiting in Asheville, North Carolina, in April 1990, Frank visited a bookstore called Malapropos. He found a book by Elizabeth O'Connor, *Call to Commitment*. Elizabeth was a member of the Church of the Saviour, founded in 1947 in Washington, D.C., by Gordon and Mary Cosby. The prayer for a helper and guide had been answered. Three months later Frank went to Washington, D.C., to meet Elizabeth and attended their first ever workshop on Servant Leadership. While Frank often refers to Elizabeth's influence, she really stands for a collective influence on the part of the Church of the Saviour. Much of his growth in God can be attributed to their spiritual direction.

In August 1990, Frank was employed at a local high school in Anderson, South Carolina, as an aide to an autistic class. Specifically, he worked one-on-one with a fourteen year old, non-verbal, black male named Glen (name changed), who was known to throw aggressive temper tantrums. It was through this class that Frank met the late Henry Busby whose autistic daughter was also a pupil.

The female teacher was afraid of Glen, so his development had been marginal over the past two years and probably longer. There were no real lesson plans for working with him. He wouldn't sit down, wouldn't do the simplest tasks, pitched temper tantrums when pressed to work, and urinated on himself. The frustrations of those first few weeks can hardly be described. Soon afterwards, Frank went to the office and looked up Glen's personal file. In it he found a psychological evaluation that suggested one not focus on visual motor skills with Glen, but on life skills.

There was a fifteen-minute interval between the two lunch periods in order for the lunchroom staff to prepare for the second lunch period. The kids trashed the tables, as one might imagine. Frank worked it out with the staff so that he and Glen could clean the tables after the first period.

They had a trash can on wheels that he and Glen pushed up and down the aisles, cleaning the tables. The principal sometimes used the period in-between to have lunch with notable business people who supported the school.

One day Glen and Frank got the trash can and started their rounds. Frank noticed that this was one of those days when the principal was having lunch with several business people. Then he unexpectedly recognized one of the men as a person with whom he had gone to high school and played football. He was dressed in a coat and tie, and worked for a lucrative real estate company. He had married his college sweetheart, had three children, a large two-story house, a nice car, and a good job. In short, he was all the things Frank was not (or so he thought). Frank had been recently divorced, moved back home with his parents, never used his education, and working with an autistic child pushing a garbage can. Addressing this moment in a sermon Frank says, "I was horrified! I was ashamed! It had been over twenty years since my high school graduation and look at me. I'm pushing a garbage can! Maybe he won't see me!"

"Well, this was to be a day that Glen would not cooperate. He started making loud noises and then lay down on the floor and put his feet straight up. Everyone looked over of course, and I was forced to acknowledge my friend's presence when we locked eyes," says Frank. "Never had I been as ashamed as I was in that moment. Glen had awakened in me a deep wound of self-hate, which I knew existed but kept hidden. I did not want to admit the garbage inside of me. Never had I been so confronted with the notion of what has real value in life, of what really constitutes personal success, as I was in that moment."

"But something inwardly broke for me in that moment," says Frank. "I saw just how sharply divided are God's ways of doing life from the world's ways." Frank kept a daily journal on Glen and himself, charting both Glen's growth into responsibility, and his own deeper growth into adulthood. While Glen went through great inner development, it was also true that he was Frank's helper and guide along the way. "I was not able at the time to thank Glen for that humiliating moment," he says. "It took time for me to realize that God had used Glen to bring me down a necessary path." Frank hated to leave Glen with a teacher and system that hadn't come to know him as God's gift to humanity.

In June 1991, Frank went to work at Busby's Garden Center (owned/operated by Henry Busby) as a landscape gardener. He worked through August only, leaving to attend Erskine Theological Seminary in September. During the remaining two years of graduate school, he returned to work each summer at Busby's (May-August, 1992 and 1993).

It was during seminary, in 1992, that Frank married Michele Ann McPeak, the daughter of Tom McPeak and Audra Phelan. Michele, the oldest of six children, was born in Kansas City, Kansas, but the family was raised primarily in Clemson, South Carolina. She has a B.A. and Masters in elementary education from Clemson University. After teaching for nearly thirty years, she completed Furman University's three year administration program in 2012, preparing for a principalship.

In 2002, Michele and Frank traveled to Fort Myers, Florida, and a few days later left the hospital with their beautiful adopted daughter, Leah Niccole. She was only eight days old. Leah was born on May 22 and named after Michele's grandmother, Leah Phelan, and her birth mother, Niccole.

Frank attended Erskine Seminary essentially as a 'freelance' student, meaning not under the care of any specific denomination. He graduated from seminary in May 1994 with a Masters of Divinity and nowhere to go, so he returned to Busby's Nursery. His work experience at the garden center, however, has had a fruitful impact on the condition of the grounds and facilities at Bethel.

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On July 17, 2000, Tom Sandifer presented the Session with the report of the Pastor Nominating Committee, recommending that a call be extended to Mr. Frank Strickland. This decision was affirmed on July 30 at the congregational meeting.



**L-R Back: Rev. Dr. Merwyn Johnson, Kimberly Riggs, and Rev. Frank Strickland  
L-R Front: Rev. Pam Patrick-Cole, Shirley Woody, and Rev. Minnie Sue Douglas**

The Installation Commission representing Foothills Presbytery ordained Frank at Bethel Church on Sunday, October 22, 2000. Dr. Johnson was one of his professors at Erskine Seminary; Elder Kim Riggs represented Bethel Church; Reverend Pam Patrick-Cole was a contemporary with Frank at Erskine and delivered the sermon; Elder Shirley Woody was from Townville Presbyterian Church; and Rev. Minnie Sue Douglas was also from Townville. Frank had done an internship with Rev. Douglas at Townville in the fall of 1997.