

# No Doubts

## First-time pastor from Knoxville adjusts to five-point charge in Ceres

Shortly after officiating at his first funeral, the Rev. Will Shelton stands on the front porch of his parsonage in Ceres.



**By Annette Spence**

*The Call*

**CERES, Va.** – The Rev. Will Shelton has just returned to the parsonage after a long Sunday that included officiating at his first funeral, and he doesn't seem tired at all.

In fact, he's bubbling with stories that show the contrast between his former life – as a University of Tennessee student in Knoxville – and his new life – as pastor of five churches in rural Tazewell District.

He mentions that snow is expected this week (in early October), and he needs to get to the nearest Wal-Mart (40 minutes away) to stock up on provisions.

He talks about the threat of colliding with deer on country roads and the useless nature of cell phones in these parts.

He shows off the large picture window in his living room, where he waves to the occasional passing vehicle as he sits at his computer. (The occupants of these vehicles always seem to know him, he says, but he hasn't quite connected cars with faces.)

And what will he do for his birthday, when he turns 25 on Oct. 13?

Shelton glances at his calendar. "I have a Ruritan meeting and potluck that I really cannot miss."

Less than four months into his first appointment as a local pastor for the Ceres Circuit, Shelton is living and learning in a new world, experiencing for the first time such pastoral duties as visiting nursing homes and preparing for charge conference.

It's no hardship for him. He loves it.

"Every second, every moment, every day, this has just felt right," says Shelton, who was hoping for a student pastor appointment in the Maryville area when he was given 12 hours to make a decision on

the Ceres appointment. "I have no doubts, no questions, that this is where I'm supposed to be."

Since June, he's put 10,000 miles on his Dodge Neon, traveling between five churches (Red Oak, Bethany, Goodman's Chapel, Zion, Ezelle), as well as to his hometown in east Tennessee. Two of his churches are in Bland County, three are in Smyth County. He preaches in each county on alternate Sundays, to congregations ranging from 15 to 30 in number.

Preaching is actually the familiar part of the routine for Shelton, who felt a call to ministry at Resurrection in 1998. His preaching experience dates to 2002 and includes a young adult service at his home church, First Alcoa United Methodist in Maryville District, and at Ebenezer UMC in Knoxville District, where he served as youth director.

As for the young pastor's other responsibilities, he says the parishioners make it easy on him.

"The assumption is that if you've got five churches, you must have five times the problems," says Shelton, perched on a computer chair in his sparsely furnished living room. "That's a credit to the people, because they are so nice. I couldn't have asked for a better situation to walk in to."

He's getting use to parishioners dropping by both day and night, bringing sweet potatoes and corn from their gardens, he says. The casual, unannounced nature of their visits had a built-in lesson for him:

"When I first got here, I always called people first before visiting," he says. More than once, he was asked, "Why are you calling?" He stopped calling ahead when he realized he was expected to "just show up."

Shelton is also adjusting to what he calls "an

adult world," where everybody knows everybody, and he is always The Pastor.

"It's all new to me, and I'm trying to figure it out," he explains. "There's an air that goes with it, a different way that people look at you. Every single one of the face-to-face relationships that I have is because I'm the pastor. It's even different from being a youth director, because you have respect as a pastor. Being a youth director didn't define my relationship with people. This does."

Shelton continues, "People from home tell me I'm different, and to an extent, I know I am. Up here – this is a very adult world. There are not a lot of people my age around here. Even when I go to the youth group meetings – that's really weird – because A, I'm not the youth director, and B, I'm the pastor."

With all that said, he enjoys it when he talks with folks on the phone who are later "blown away" by his youth when they see him in person.

And he insists that he has "not been lonely for a second." He gets visits from his parents, who both serve on staff at First Alcoa UMC, and he makes trips back to Knoxville, where he gets fixed up on friends, bookstores, and fast food.

"McDonald's is like a delicacy now," says Shelton, whose parsonage is 14 miles away from a Dairy Queen and Subway.

Nine hours short of a degree in history from UT, Shelton is considering completing his bachelor's and attending seminary.

In the meantime, he's already on an educational fast track, even if the pace in his new community is a little slower, and the only other soul on the road might be a deer. ■

*Annette Spence is editor of The Call.*