

A PASTOR TO THE CITY

written by Christina Nifong As public servant, parent, volunteer and student, Joe Cobb answers his calling to connect.



Joe Cobb begins his days by proclaiming a public prayer.

When the feeling of emptiness deepens and strengthens our vulnerability, Amen.

Seven days a week, he posts “A Prayer for Today” on Facebook and LinkedIn.

When we work together, we build a healthier community. Amen.

It’s been four years since he led a church. That hasn’t stopped him from ministering.

When the seed of an idea nourishes our soul, Amen.

Cobb was raised in a religious home, ordained in the United Methodist Church, served as pastor for eight years at Metropolitan Community Church of the Blue Ridge. But since 2018, he has largely traded his robes and stoles for white dress shirts and colorful bow ties. He’s more often found in city council chambers than preaching from a pulpit.

No matter.

Cobb has spent much of his 59 years seeking an authentic life. Listen is what he does. Love is who he is. Serving is how he walks through his days.

It’s just that all the residents of Roanoke have become his congregation.

“When you meet Joe, you know instantly, he puts his love of God first, family second, and everything else falls in line after that,”

says Brenda Hale, president of the Roanoke Branch of the NAACP and retired Army nurse. “Joe has this spirit. Everybody can recognize it.”

In 2018, Cobb—an openly gay man—was the top vote-getter in Roanoke’s City Council election. He’s also chaplain at Hermitage Roanoke retirement community, community outreach coordinator at

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Highland Park Elementary School and wrapping up a Doctor of Ministry in Spirituality at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia. For that, he is creating an oral history and a healing ritual to commemorate 933 graves that were moved in 1961 as part of urban renewal from Old Lick Cemetery—the oldest African American burial ground in Roanoke—to a mass grave six miles away.

It’s a professional patchwork that Cobb says serves him well, permitting him to hear from retirees and parents, community leaders and kids, business owners and the disenfranchised. Working across so many communities allows him to do what he does best: Find ways to bring people together.

But this delicate balance was hard-won. Cobb’s journey has been circuitous, sometimes wrenching and filled with self-doubt. The painful parts help him relate with others’ struggles, he says.

“I guess for me, it comes back to that dynamic of love,” he explains in his quiet, earnest voice. “Love is something that is a thread that kind of runs through everything. I try and tap into that as much as I can. And I think that’s the center from which I function. I find that if I keep coming back to that, it helps guide me through the world.”

CROSSROADS

Cobb began his life in the humblest of circumstances: born to an unwed mother at an institution that required she surrender her child.

He became the eldest of four children, all adopted by a nurturing couple in Wichita, Kansas.

He was a serious, studious boy, who played golf, sang in school musicals and

could be spotted in dress shirt and bow tie even in elementary school.

He grew up in the embrace of the Methodist church, fed by the people and songs and traditions there. While in college, he felt called to become a church pastor. At the same time, he secretly wondered if he were gay.

When he entered seminary at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, he met Leigh Anne Taylor, an outgoing church musician and fellow seminarian, from Southwest Virginia. Over nearly two decades, she captured his heart, made him a father and ministered beside him in churches in Texas and England and Kansas.

Then, she set him free to become the man he was meant to be.

The singular struggle of Cobb's life was choosing to live as an openly gay man—and, as a result, losing his position as an ordained minister in the United Methodist Church.

For a time, he lost his role as husband and son-in-law, too. But through a remarkable journey of forgiveness, tenacity and dedication, Cobb and Taylor created a new way of being family, one where acceptance and honesty were valued above all else. The two chronicled their experiences in a joint memoir, "Our Family Outing: A Memoir of Coming Out and Coming Through," published in 2011.

Taylor and their children moved to Blacksburg in 1999 to be close to family. Cobb followed, settling in Roanoke in 2001. He worked for various nonprofits, including executive director of what was then Interfaith Hospitality Network—now Family Promise—a collaboration among area churches to shelter homeless families.

But the call to minister was strong. In 2006, he was ordained by the Metropolitan Community Church, a denomination established in 1968 to serve the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer community, a group often ostracized from traditional religions. Cobb became pastor of Metropolitan Community Church of the Blue Ridge in 2009. For eight years, he led that congregation, shepherding its flock and addressing human rights issues across the community.

Cobb met Roanoke radiologist James Matthews in 2001. They settled into a

renovated historic home in Old Southwest. In time, they had two children—a daughter, now in 7th grade, and son, a 5th grader—through a surrogate mother. One June, they married in a rainstorm atop Roanoke's Center in the Square.

Then, in 2017, Cobb found himself again at a crossroads. He was approached by the leadership of the Metropolitan Community Church in Los Angeles, the founding MCC congregation, whose birth fostered the growth of 172 churches in 37 countries. If Cobb became pastor there, his influence would be exponentially larger than ever in his life.

He interviewed and was offered the position. Then he paused, and considered all he'd be leaving behind: his two adult children, a city he had come to cherish, a broad collection of acquaintances and friends. He'd be potentially uprooting his husband and young children.

By summer's end, he shifted gears, deciding to stay. He chose family and community over position and power.

"What I came to discover is that Roanoke has become my home," he explains.

Then, he says, he realized, "Okay, my next step is to find a way to give back to the city, to invest in this city, and to do that in a way that's connected with social justice and equity, those things that I value."

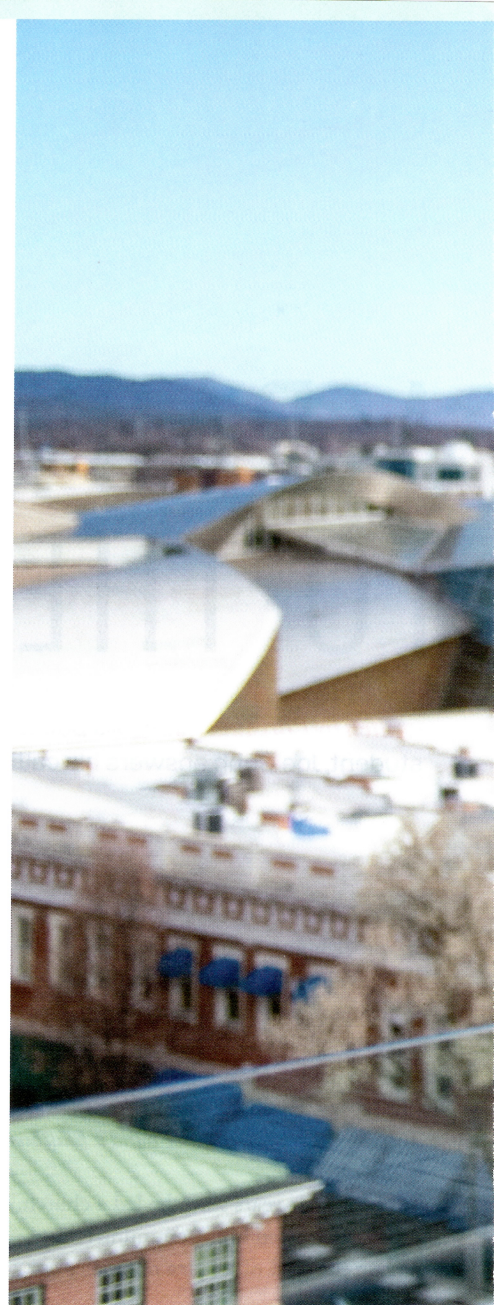
Cobb wasn't walking away from leading a church so much as expanding his definition of what "church" was.

BUILDING BRIDGES

Cobb enters a tiny, tidy office on the second floor of the Lawson Building, a two-story structure that sits alone in a quiet corner of the Gainsboro neighborhood.

This spartan space is his place to work, focus, recharge. It's a needed refuge. When Cobb is not here, he is giving everything he's got.

His days are divided. Some begin at Highland Park Elementary School, where, as community outreach coordinator, he finds projects that link students with their city. A recent example: collecting videos of community members introducing themselves and reading poems for Black History Month.



Cobb's day might continue at Hermitage Roanoke, a retirement community near Roanoke Country Club. There, he ministers to residents and supports staff. He leads a Vespers service on Sunday nights. Over the past year, he has sat with the sick and dying even as their family members could not be with them due to COVID.

"He genuinely cares," says James Stovall, executive director at Hermitage Roanoke. One example of how deeply he connects with people, says Stovall, is on display during the Hermitage's All Saints' Day service, where residents who died during the previous year are remembered.

"Joe gets to know our residents on a level that he can speak to their lifetime



accomplishments, their personality, their whole life story.... He's able to summarize somebody's life in a way that in about five minutes gets the picture of who they were, so that we can celebrate them."

But Cobb's most defining—and most time-consuming—position is his role as city council member. It is there that he listens, guides, appoints and shapes the future of Roanoke.

He has chosen justice and equity as the "key values that I bring into the work." He's proudest of the progress that the council's task force on gun violence prevention has made. He's committed to expanding accessibility to public transportation. He is always striving to

include more people in the conversation.

"I love all of our city. And I think all of our city has remarkable residents and beauty," he says. "Historically, portions of our city have been stigmatized and made to be less than and are still thought of as less than. And that is something that I just can't bear."

If Cobb aims to spotlight those who've been overlooked, though, he also hopes to serve as a bridge, lifting up while also uniting.

"I think it's important to find ways to bring people together to find those common values and threads that really are at the heart of who we are as human beings and tap into those."

Cobb has a year-and-a-half left on

his city council term. He intends to keep listening, keep searching for solutions, keep building relationships. He hopes to be re-elected in 2022—so he can continue connecting everyone in his adopted city.

"Roanoke is changing," says the NAACP's Hale. "With people like Joe, that change is coming about. Roanoke can be better. The way you get better is by working on being better," she says.

"The horizon is brighter with Joe here with us."

Editor's note: Joe Cobb was awarded Gold for "Male Star of the Star City" in our Best of Roanoke 2021 reader poll. See his win on page 38. ☆