

Rev. Jim Yao – bio

For nearly eight years, I was co-pastor with my wife, and later, solo pastor to two yoked churches: First Presbyterian Church in Hector and Lodi Presbyterian Church located in the Finger Lakes region of New York. This was my first pastorate out of seminary, and confirmed my sense of call to the ordered ministry of teaching elder – a call that took a long path to realization.

I was born in New York City, and grew up on Long Island. My mother was from Indianapolis, and was a church organist and choir director. My father was Chinese, grew up in Shanghai, fled to Hong Kong with his family in 1949. He later came to the US to attend Hanover College, a PCUSA-affiliated college in southern Indiana, where he met my mother.

While I was baptized Presbyterian (Fifth Avenue in NYC), I grew up, and spent most of my life in the Reformed Church in America. This was the denomination that shaped much of my theology. I learned and later taught the Heidelberg Catechism, and have grown to love this confession especially the first question and answer: “What is my only comfort in life and in death? That I am not my own but belong, body and soul, in life and in death, to my faithful savior Jesus Christ.”

And the two congregations I belonged to (Plainview Reformed Church on Long Island, and First Reformed Church of Wynantskill near Albany, NY) helped shape my faith. Growing up an organist’s kid, I spent a lot of time at church helping my mother, and, of course, singing in the choir. Reconnecting to an RCA church in college, I jumped back into choir singing, and also served as a deacon and elder, taught Sunday school, and served on several committees. It was at the Wynantskill church that I met Nancy. We were married at that church and each of our two sons was baptized there.

While a member at Wynantskill, I was asked to serve on the General Program Council of the RCA. At my first meeting, we attended a series of lectures given by Lesslie Newbigin, one of the big voices in missiology, who talked about the local church as a mission outpost in communities that no longer knew the stories or the language of the Bible. His talk resonated with me and raised questions about the nature of the church and its mission. Those questions prodded me down a new path.

I had graduated with B.S. degree in chemistry from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, and spent 28 years in information technology at various companies. But now I began to pursue becoming a lay preacher. Soon after starting down this path, my company asked me to transfer to their headquarters in Florida. My move was conditional on finding a church. Finding no RCA churches in northeast Florida, we discovered the PC(USA).

Nancy and I joined Memorial Presbyterian Church in St. Augustine where we jumped back into active participation in its ministry and mission work. Soon after joining, our pastor and others asked my wife and me why we weren’t considering seminary. They saw something that neither of us had seriously considered. It took a few more years before I was ready to acknowledge God’s call. In 2006, I began attending Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, graduating in 2009.

Growing up biracial and in a fairly diverse area, I learned to navigate a variety of cultures and faiths – attending bar mitzvahs, helping out with VBS at the Roman Catholic Church, paying respects at funerals of my father’s Buddhist friends. These experiences gave me a sensitivity and openness that helped me as a hospital chaplain intern, as a pastoral intern at Atlanta Taiwanese Presbyterian Church, and in my call as pastor.

But my biggest support and joy is my partner in marriage and ministry, the Rev. Nancy Meehan Yao, the Associate General Presbyter for Shenandoah Presbytery. Together we raised two sons who are now grown and both music majors. Our older son, John, works at Ithaca College and is an elder at First Presbyterian Church in Ithaca, NY. Our younger son, James, is a teacher at an Episcopal middle school / high school in Minnesota.

My greatest interest has been and still is music, especially singing in church choirs, community choruses, and even a little opera. I also play flute and a little piano. I enjoy ice skating, walking dogs, and reading mystery and adventure novels. I have a strong interest in science and astronomy, enjoy the NY Times crossword puzzles, and, of course, food.

I look forward to bringing my gifts and experiences to serving God together with the congregation of Moorefield Presbyterian Church.