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How did we end up here? A tribute to Dr. Melva Costen

"What would you think about signing up for the Young Adult Volunteer program and spending a year in Kenya?" I asked Shelvis. My face reflected the computer's glow as I scrolled down the PC(USA) website in our apartment in Decatur, Georgia. My final year of seminary had nudged me to start looking for "what's next?"

Shelvis, on the other hand, felt content. Serving as youth pastor of New Life Presbyterian Church in College Park, Georgia, he appreciated the opportunity to work in the church he attended in High School. In addition, we just helped start a youth outreach program, and the relationships developing with families there meant a lot to us.

"Let's pray about it," Shelvis responded. Later, he confessed that was his "spiritual" way of trying to avoid the topic. He hoped it would not come up again.

It did. So, we decided to take a step beyond praying and seek the wisdom of our elders. Consequently, we found ourselves at Paschal's Restaurant across the table from Dr. Melva Costen, a well-respected leader in the Presbyterian Church.

Dining at Paschal's Restaurant in the West End of Atlanta always felt significant. The stories of MLK Jr. and leaders of the Civil Rights movement eating there while planning steps towards bettering our nation still sit in the booths at Paschal's. It felt like a sacred space.

"If you feel God has called you to the ministry of reconciliation," Dr. Costen said, after listening to us pour out our hearts. "Then go to Kenya, learn from what the church is doing there with reconciliation, then bring what you learn back to us here."

Both incredible church leaders in their own right, Dr. Melva Costen and her husband, Rev. Dr. James Costen, cherished their deep connections with the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA). They partnered with the PCEA in the creation of a Seminary in Kenya. Consequently, she knew firsthand the benefit of sitting at the feet of Kenyan elders, being strengthened by their experiences and faith.



Dr. Melva Costen believed deeply that the U.S. church needs to learn from churches around the world. She encouraged us to "go."

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In the U.S., Dr. Costen is known for her gifts in teaching and music. Johnson C. Smith Theological Seminary, where she served as Professor of Music and Worship, created The Costen Institute of Worship Leadership in tribute to her legacy. She also led the committee to create the Presbyterian hymnal in 1990 and taught as a visiting professor at the Yale Institute of Sacred Music.

Reflecting on church history, the Presbyterian Church in the United States split in 1861 over the issue of slavery. In 1983, a worship service was held to reunite the two denominations. Dr. Melva Costen directed the choir for that historic occasion.

While highly accoladed for her musical talent, it was Dr. Costen's missiology that changed the course of our lives. During our time of discerning international ministry, we carefully listened. Many voices from the church articulated mission as a way the U.S. church helps people in developing countries. Alternatively, Dr. Costen spoke about the mutuality of mission, affirming the inherent value of all members of our global community. Even more, she realized the critical importance of the U.S. church learning from sister denominations in other parts of the world.

After our Paschals meal, Shelvis was on board. We applied, interviewed, and packed our bags for Nairobi, Kenya. Our one year evolved into fifteen years in the region of East Africa. It didn't take us long to recognize we needed more time to learn about reconciliation from the church in East Africa. Seeking to honor Dr. Costen, we have tried to share with U.S. congregations about the incredible peacebuilding work we witness, about radical forgiveness, and about the transforming miracles of truth and justice.

I can't think of a conversation that has had more influence on the course of my life than the one shared over soul food with Melva Costen. We are deeply saddened that we will not be present to mourn her recent passing on the 8th of September and to celebrate her life among loved ones in Atlanta. Her legacy challenges me to take the time to sit with young people, to share a new mindset, a new way of valuing others in our local and global community. For some, it may alter the course of their lives. To God be the Glory. Amen

Nancy and Shelvis