

ANIMAL STORIES

Presbyterians share stories of the animals that have changed their lives.



The story of a Shetland sheepdog and a boy named Tobias

From the dog's perspective
By Sue Montgomery

Hello! My name is Toby. I'm named after Tobias. When he was 12, Tobias experienced more pain than any child should. He witnessed his father shoot his mother. Thankfully, she survived.

Like many children who experience domestic violence and tragedy, Tobias felt it was all his fault. He blamed himself for his father's actions. Sadly, he believed suicide was the answer to end his pain.

I was born just when Tobias had been released from the hospital. Helping his recovering mother raise Shetland sheepdog puppies served as therapy for Tobias's post-traumatic stress.

Tobias and I formed a profound relationship on the night I was born, and our bond grew from there. Tobias held me on his lap upside down to

watch TV. He carried me on his shoulders. He held me for hours on end.

When Tobias was hurting and his tears flowed into my fur, it was as if his tears were nourishing in me a compassionate spirit. He taught me how to listen by being quiet. (Not barking is exceptionally difficult for a Sheltie!) He taught me how to patiently look into a person's eyes and connect in heart and spirit.

And he taught me how to help people reconnect with laughter and recover joy by playing and trusting one another. I think my heavy fur coat, bushy tail, long, lean nose, and enormous, twinkling brown eyes reminded him of a clown!

The long process that brought me to my forever family was so complicated we're certain we were meant for each other.

For nine years now, I've been visiting rooms at hospitals, nursing homes, and rehabilitation centers where I've looked into the eyes of people who are hurting. I've rested my head on chests, and my paws have



stroked arms. My eyes have looked into the eyes of the dying. My fur has absorbed more tears. So many smiles have broken through pain.

I'm proof that relationships between humans and animals bring healing and comfort. Thanks be to God for Tobias. He taught me everything!

Tobias is now a father with his own son. He's doing well.

Sue Montgomery is the pastor of Nickleville Presbyterian Church in Emlenton, Pennsylvania.

Partners on the move

By Joyce Cass Pratt

There are many books that tell of animal heroes. My Seeing Eye dog did not save me from a burning building or from drowning in a lake. Better than that, she saves my life every day by giving me the independence to live life the way I choose! Whether taking me to the strip mall, bus stop, or train station or helping me travel from coast to coast, my Kia girl is there beside me with excitement, dedication, and love. Kia is an everyday hero!

Planes, trains, automobiles, on foot and paws . . . that's how my canine partner and I travel.

I have an eye disease known as RP (retinitis pigmentosa) that slowly steals away vision, as well as independence and mobility. I gave up driving in 1993 and my job in 1996, and then my eyes degenerated even more. I consider myself to be a resourceful and adaptable person, but going blind is quite a challenge. If I have a bad day, I remind myself that "joy cometh in the morning" and then start the new day with Jesus on my right and Kia on my left. With a team like that, along with my supportive husband, Gary, I can't lose! God gave me a verse years ago: "For we walk by faith, not by sight." Without faith, I

could not go through the valleys of this life.

I am grateful for the gift of Kia, who guides me through the darkness of blindness into the light of life.

Joyce Pratt is a member of Trinity United Church in Warren, New Jersey.





I'll have the blow-dried goose

By Charles Denison

Have you ever tried blow-dried goose? Or have you ever attempted to blow-dry a Canada goose? It is, admittedly, a unique preparation. It requires several steps, culminating in the blow-drying itself:

Step 1: idiotic restaurateur

Based on my experience, we need to begin with a selfish idiot who runs a restaurant. Now, when the trap backs up on a restaurant grill, it produces some of the worst-smelling grease imaginable. So, our scumbag chef decides to save a few bucks and dump his used grease in a nearby waterway, instead of paying the fee and legally disposing of the stuff.

Step 2: enter the goose

Next thing you know, here come the geese. They've landed here for years, and this waterway is literally imprinted into their brains. So they land and begin swimming around. They don't suspect sabotage. But then

their underwater feathers begin feeling odd. They're soaking up the grease. That grease saturates the feathers, inhibiting their insulating functions. The geese try to check the feathers, but anytime a wing or a head or a tail hits the water, the worse it gets. The more they struggle, the more soaked they become. Their formerly insulating feathers now allow the cold to seep in. These geese have sat in nearly frozen waters, and have commuted from Thunder Bay to Indianapolis and never known cold. Now they're shivering, on a river in North Carolina.

Step 3: goose roundup

They don't know you're here to help. They just know that something is wrong, and now here you are. So you have to round them up, but they don't think that's a good idea. And they don't cooperate. Somehow you get most of them into pens in the back of your pickup and cart them off to a waterfowl rescue facility.

Step 4: wash cycle

The geese may be bewildered, but they will not go gently into that good night. While they fight and honk and bite,

Giving new meaning to 'birdbrain'

By Karen Bosc

The first inkling that our parakeet was really smart came when I kissed her on the shoulder.

"Thank you!" she said.

My husband, Mike, and I already knew that Keety had vocal skills. When she had belonged to Mike's mother, Keety had imitated the dog barking, the telephone ringing, and the microwave ping. But we didn't realize then that she could learn phrases and even use them in the right context. In fact, we felt conflicted about adopting her when Mike's mother died.

Our concern was that Keety might not get along with our other two small parrots, a cockatiel and a lineolated parakeet. But we felt confident we could give her a good home, so we decided to roll the dice.

Keety proved to be the smartest pet we've ever had. We didn't try to teach her to talk; she simply learned phrases by paying attention to what

we said. Almost everything she said was loving: "You're so sweet." "You're so cute." "You're so good." "I love you." "You're pretty." "Gimme a kiss." "You're beautiful." "These birdies are beautiful." She often used these phrases in the correct context. (She wasn't the first parrot to do this; for example, researcher Irene Pepperberg has documented the impressive conversational skills of her African grey parrot Alex.)

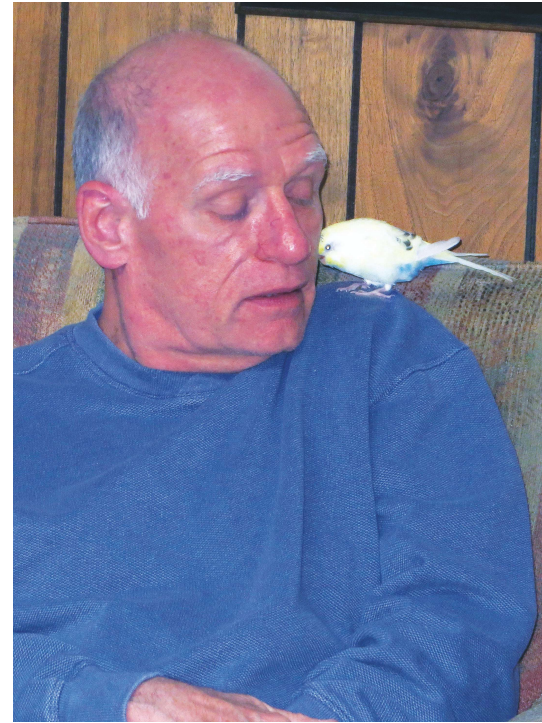
Sometimes when Keety would notice another bird outside a window, she'd hurry over to the window and announce, "Sweet, cute Keety!" I think she was introducing herself. Once, when I pointed out a bird perching outside a window, she hurried over to it and said: "Be careful! Better be careful!"

She also learned to make the kissing sound, and she used that too in the correct context, kissing both her birdie friends and us.

And our earlier concern that she might not fit in with the other birds? One day when she and her birdie

friends were dozing off on top of a cage, she cracked an eye open and quietly said, "I love these birdies."

Karen Bosc is associate editor of Presbyterians Today and lives in New Albany, Indiana.



you carry them into a room where they're graded as to the severity of their condition. For record keeping, then they get tagged. Next, their eyes are covered in salve. Then you carry them to a tub and hold them down, while another volunteer washes them in Dawn. You rub them, dab them, try to get under their feathers, all over their stomachs and legs and under the wings. The geese never relax.

Step 5: rinse cycle

Then you hold up your goose and let her drip for a minute or two, and it's off to the rinse. This takes you to a bathtub with a sprayer. You hold the bird, spreading wings, positioning backs and fronts for the spray, while another volunteer does the spraying. Your goose, meanwhile, enjoys the process and cooperates. Well, maybe not so much.

Step 6: dry cycle

At last, you're ready to towel off your bird. If you haven't been bitten yet, here's your chance. You try to fluff the feathers, get under the wings, get the belly and back.

Step 7: repeat

Most birds will go through the process at least four or five times before their feathers can stand up to conditions.

Step 8: blow-dry

There's a blow-dryer in a heated drying room. So you chase the large geese around the little room with your blow-dryer. They're easy enough to trap; they usually head for the corners. But when they've had enough, they come charging and flapping, honking and snapping, and you wisely let them go. But they can't get far. Then a volunteer picks up an angry goose, and you wave the blow-dryer all over his tummy.

The final step: reflections

We can only hope that we'll continue to see good men and women whose hearts are stirred when they hear the call to action, so we might outnumber the idiots who pollute our waters and endanger our waterfowl through their selfish acts. Thanks to all of you volunteers!

Charles Denison was the founding pastor of New Hope Presbyterian Church in Fishers, Indiana. He is now retired and living in Montana.

Minis' ministry makes a big impact

By Ramona Orton

I'm a pastor for three small-town/rural congregations. I'm also a horse fanatic. I have two full-size horses and a miniature horse, Jethro, and a miniature donkey, Chester.

I started taking my minis to a local nursing home several years ago. The staff brings the residents outside to visit with my little minis. On our first visit, one of my favorite nursing home residents had pneumonia and could not come outside to see the little ones. So, we took them to her. The staff removed the screen from her window and she greeted them through the open window.

Doris wanted so badly to give

them a treat, but all she had were some stale, sugar-coated doughnut holes. They loved them, especially Chester. So whenever they were scheduled for a visit, Doris made sure to have sugar-coated doughnut holes on hand for Chester.

My minis love these visits. They get excited when they see me backing up the trailer toward their pasture. They can't wait to "get on the bus." When we get there, as we are crossing the lawn Chester leans into Jethro and gives him a few nips as if to say, "You get the ones with the carrots; that lady with those sugar-coated doughnut holes is mine."

The visits meant the world to Doris, who passed away this past winter.

They mean a lot to many of the residents. I can usually pick out who has owned horses in the past, as can Jethro and Chester. Both Jethro and Chester tend to want to stay by those who know just the right place to scratch.

They've visited other places as well. They love giving and getting attention from both the elderly and those with special needs. The part that fascinates me the most is how these little minis seem to know just who needs that extra smooch or loving nibbles. Now if only I could get them to load onto the trailer to go home without quibbling about it.

Ramona Orton is the pastor of Trinity Parish in Highland, Wisconsin.



Sometimes God's love comes to us on four legs

By Kevin Switala

While our wonderful son, Max, faces many challenges, including anxiety and seizure disorders, he has been blessed with incredible creativity and vitality. Medication only partially mitigates his constant anxieties and erratic seizures. Max lives every day to its fullest, and we constantly seek new and innovative ways to help him enjoy life and succeed. However, each environment presents different types of stress that often trigger less than optimal behaviors and reactions. This is what ultimately led us to Zumba.

Zumba is Max's service dog, a two-year-old black standard poodle that was placed with our family through 4 Paws for Ability last September. The nonprofit 4 Paws for Ability remains one of the only agencies placing services dogs with young children to help them with special needs ranging

from seizure and diabetic alerts to mobility assistance. This successful organization selected our family after a thorough application process and then cross-trained Zumba for seizure alert and behavioral disruption. For Max and Zumba, we believe it was bonding at first smell and lick!

Only three days into training with Zumba, she demonstrated her seizure-alert ability with her incredible sense of smell. Incredibly enough, she routinely alerts with noticeable behavior four hours in advance of an oncoming seizure and is right every time. Having an early warning system like this is every parent's dream, and significantly reduced our stress from never knowing when Max would experience a seizure.

Zumba is also quite intelligent and so loving of *her* boy, as we say. She goes everywhere with Max, including school, church—boy did that raise a few eyebrows initially!—and



everywhere in public. Her training and love kicks in when she senses Max reaching an agitated state, at which time she goes into action: nuzzling, licking, letting Max pet her, calming Max enough to prevent further escalation. This has greatly improved Max's ability to participate in public activities. We love Zumba and could not think of life without her now.

Kevin Switala is a member of Wallingford (Pennsylvania) Presbyterian Church.

A good name

By Myrlene Hamilton Hess

Less than a week after we brought home a feisty eight-week-old chocolate Lab, my husband was diagnosed with stage-four lung cancer. Amazing Grace has dogged my steps ever since.

Gracie's antics brought me both comfort and laughter as I walked with my husband through his cancer treatments, his death, and beyond. She was with me through the loss of our other Labs, Spike and Misty, and also helped me welcome a new husband into our home. As she matured, Gracie became the dog I always wanted: gentle, obedient, and *very* social. And something else that I never dreamed of: a pastoral assistant.

Our dog-friendly church welcomed her regular presence in my office and at our Saturday service. She warmly greeted our food pantry shoppers. After Superstorm Sandy, Gracie found her niche spending time with

the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance volunteer work teams who came to stay at our church while working on home repairs. Her presence gave them a feel of home away from home.

Gracie was a regular attender of AA meetings, walking around during the meetings, making sure that every single person felt a bump from her cold nose. The same thing happened at the Saturday service. She was never happy until she had said hello to each person. Once she had greeted everyone, she would choose one person and settle down to snore through my sermon. Sometimes it was the person with a treat in his or her pocket. More often it was the person who was lonely or sad.

True to her name, she aged gracefully these 13 years. Severe arthritis and cancer gradually reduced her mobility, but they couldn't stop her humor. On a Saturday evening in April she snoozed in my office while the service went on without her. But when the congregation began to sing the last

hymn, "Grace Alone," Gracie marched quickly into the sanctuary, wagging her tail each time her name was sung.

That was her last church visit. Gracie died on May 11, but Amazing Grace will always be in my heart.

Myrlene Hess is the pastor of Morning Star Presbyterian Church in Bayville, New Jersey.



The pastoral pup with a dinosaur smile

By Thirza Sayers

My T Rex had an exuberant greeting from the beginning. At eight weeks he was just two pounds of puppy and already rearing up with his ferocious dinosaur smile—he named himself.

My mostly black miniature poodle has an endearing white marking on his chest, which, a friend suggested, resembles a clerical collar. At our church, he quickly became known as the pastoral pup.

Rex passed his certification for animal-assisted activities when he was just 10 months old, which was remarked to be extremely special . . . but I knew that. So we have *officially* been serving together since 2006.

One day, as we rushed out of our apartment building to get to seminary, T Rex took a U-turn and headed away from the elevator.

Frustrated, I wondered, “What in the world?” He has a clear understanding of what “bye-bye” means and strangely defied my communication. He stopped and pawed at an unknown neighbor’s door.

The neighbor swiftly opened the door before I could scoop him up and run back toward the elevator. She had heard Rex’s gentle tapping. Immediately I saw sadness on her face, apologized for my dog’s knock, and awkwardly introduced us. I acknowledged her apparent sorrow and asked if there was anything I could do.

Her dad had died that week. She needed someone to listen, to sit with her in her grief and bewilderment. Somehow Rex sensed this need through a locked door and down a hallway. He obeyed the call to serve and called me out of my busyness to love our neighbor. He remarkably did this two other times with neighbors who were sick, alone, and in need of care.

Additional talents include herding bison, praying, smiling, puppy push-ups, playing his keyboard, dancing, cuddling (voluntarily and on command), volunteering in hospitals, and assisting with the children’s time during worship and with humane education for the Animal Protection Agency.

Thirza Sayers lives in St. Louis, Missouri.



Missionary for Jesus in an RV park

By Tamara John

As director of Hope for Life Chapel RV Ministry, I live on-site with my dog, Jobie, in a custom-made fifth-wheel RV with a 12' × 10' chapel in the back. Jobie, a Chinese crested Powderpuff, was named after the book of Job, specifically chapter 42, when, after losing everything, Job is redeemed by the Lord.

People live at the RV park on a permanent as well as short-term basis. Some have lost their homes, are going through divorce, are sick and need to be near a hospital, or (because of their choices or other people’s choices) are in an upside-down emotional situation. Others have simply chosen a more reclusive, nomadic lifestyle.

Pets are crucial in times of crisis. Almost everyone in the RV park has a beloved dog that is clearly important to them for health, survival,

and mental sustainability. In fact, we all recognize each other by our dogs! Sometimes a pet is all that the residents have for companionship and love. When money is tight, some people feed their pets instead of themselves.

Jobie is my missionary for Jesus in the RV park. He opens the door to building relationships and meeting needs. People who are not initially comfortable talking to me will come and pet Jobie and see how friendly I am. Jobie is a way for unconditional love to be shared as an example of God’s unconditional love. Thanks to Jobie, those who live day to day under dark clouds of despair have begun to open up to Jesus’ love and engage with others. God’s infinite mercy offers a glimmer of hope.

Jobie is a blessing to me as well as to the RV residents we serve. Jobie is by my side as I live out God’s call on my life to reach the lost and hurting in the RV community. Together, we have seen God turn

transitional circumstances into a family community.

Tamara John is the director of Hope for Life Chapel RV Ministry in Huntington Beach, California.



‘Dog is God spelled backwards’

By Mac Morrison

For years I worked as a pastoral counselor at treatment centers in New Mexico, often with a dog trained in animal-assisted therapy. I saw many miracles happen because the dogs were there with patients, but one dog and one day made Jake—a red Australian shepherd—a hero at the hospital.

It was closing time when the clinical director asked if I would stay later and see a troubled young man who was addicted to heroin and meth. He was going to be moved to another treatment center in the morning. Then she added: “I’m at a loss, Mac. Josh is my younger brother.”

Jake had been going to work with me and helping with the patient groups for addiction and depression. The clients adored him. He seemed to always know who was most in need and gave his attention in just the right way.

I wasn’t prepared for what we saw, however, when we entered Josh’s room. He had been “high” for five days without sleep, and he looked tortured as he was coming off a drug cocktail that nearly killed him. He seemed to have a sneer ready, but when he saw the dog he seemed curious.

We talked about how Jake had been abandoned and left in an empty house without food—nearly starving before animal rescue personnel got him out. Josh listened, holding Jake near him.

“I get that. I know what it feels like to just be thrown away,” Josh said, more to Jake than to me. He told me some of his history. He had gang tattoos on his arms, but none was as chilling as the one on his left wrist. It read “Left Hand Path,” the designation of someone whose life belonged to the devil. As he talked, Jake sat with him, licking his face occasionally.

“Jake doesn’t care what I’ve done, does he?” Josh asked. “Yeah,” I said, “maybe only God and dogs love us unconditionally, but it still feels really good.”

“I don’t believe in God; that’s just a myth,” Josh snapped, glaring at me. “If you think I’m going to believe in that crap I won’t—not ever.”

I told him Jake and I had no agenda, but I wanted him to be OK. We talked more about his addiction. He was determined to get out and use again, as soon as possible. He didn’t think he would live very long.

Before we left I asked if we could pray with him.

“It won’t do any good; God wouldn’t love me even if he actually existed.”

I asked him what God could do—if he existed—to show Josh he did love him.

“He could take my craving for drugs away,” Josh laughed sarcastically.

“OK,” I said. “Let’s pray for that.”

We held hands and prayed. We asked God to show Josh in a graphic way that God loved him and would



not give up on him. Jake lay in his lap, and tears ran down my face. When we had finished, Josh was crying too. He wiped away the tears and gave Jake a long hug before we left.

Five days later our clinical director came to see me with news about Josh. She handed me a small envelope. Inside was a note from Josh: “Hey, Jake, Dog is God spelled backwards!” He had wrapped the paper over a dog biscuit!

I laughed, and then she told me the best part. “Josh said to tell you—and he said you would understand—he has *no* craving for drugs! It’s a miracle, Mac!”

It was the beginning of a new life for Josh.

That same year Jake got a championship in national working trials. But nothing compared to the work he did in healing the hearts and minds of so many people in desperate need—with help from the Great Healer, whose love surpasses anything we can imagine.

Mac Morrison lives in Austin, Texas.