

live with the abuse she suffered in that home. Otherwise, she was "going against God's laws and wishes" and "jeopardizing her salvation."

"I just looked at him and said, 'If that's God, I don't want any part of him,'" she recalls.

At that point, Denton already had emotional scars from growing up with an abusive, alcoholic parent. She had encountered two faiths that she says "were just about the rules. God's love was never nurtured." When her first marriage expired, Denton would spend the next decade doing things she would regret and trying to recover from them.

After her strict 15-year stint in the Mormon Church, Denton says she went "haywire." She turned to substance abuse and neglected relationships with her then-teenaged children. She met a man, whom she followed to Tennessee to get away from her problems in Arizona. Six weeks after she and her daughter arrived in Kingsport, her new love walked out on her.

Stuck in Tennessee and too proud to call home for help, Denton worked two jobs. In 1992 she moved to Knoxville for a secretarial job. In 1993 she met another man, whom she ultimately accompanied to Maryville and married in 1999.

The Rev. Ann Robins, pastor of Logan's Chapel UMC, remembers the first day Denton came to the church. The articulate, spiritually secure woman the pastor sees today is not the same woman she met in October 2002.

"There was fear and uncertainty in her eyes," says Robins. "You could tell she wanted something different."

Denton doesn't know exactly why she decided to get up one morning and go to Logan's Chapel, but she does realize now that she was "going over the edge." Alcohol and drug abuse was becoming "a permanent fixture" in her home. Money was tight. Broken relationships with her children and yet another unhealthy marriage were taking its toll.

Her husband made fun of her for going to church that morning ("Why, baby, they ain't going to let you in. You were drunk last night"), but Denton went anyway.

To her surprise, God didn't slam the doors in her face and the people were kind. To Denton's delight, Judy Clabough introduced her as "my friend." And when Robins greeted her in the pew, Denton admittedly was surprised to meet a female preacher, but more impressed that Robins was warm and welcoming without prying into her past.

From then on, God put her on "fast forward," Denton says. She had a voracious appetite for reading the Bible. She attended



Photo by Annette Bender, The Call

As Logan Chapel's newly appointed lay leader, Pam Denton is a strong witness. "God is healing her and giving her a desire to share Christ with others," says Pastor Ann Robins.

church and Bible study regularly, sang in the choir and participated in the live nativity scene at Christmas. ("I was an angel!" Denton says, laughing again at the irony.) She stopped drinking and popping pills. She attended weekly counseling sessions with Robins.

Her husband disliked the transition and badgered her about it constantly. Denton hung tough, even though she struggled with her prior conceptions of faith based on Catholic and Mormon teachings.

"I had God in a box," she says. "I even struggled with the fact that I was now in a church with a woman minister. It was hard ... But I know now that God put me exactly with the right minister and the right congregation. I didn't need another male figure in my life telling me how wrong I had been. I needed Ann."

Denton also cherished her relationships with her new friends, the congregation: "They did not show me any of the attitudes that I had experienced at other churches ... They never looked at the person that I was when I walked in the door. They just kept looking at the person I was turning into - and encouraging that. I needed that church."

A year later, Denton's life took another dramatic turn. She liked the way that God was changing her, but her home life was increasingly difficult. Her husband, who had been unemployed for a year, became more resentful of the changes in her life, of her new friends. Even though she dutifully cooked, cleaned and brought home a paycheck, he taunted her praying, her Bible reading, her disinterest in drinking with him.

The relationship came to a violent end on Dec. 11, when Denton's husband came home and found her reading the Bible again. The story she was reading: David and Goliath.

"I could tell he had been drinking," Denton remembers. "Normally, after he ate, he would go to sleep. But something set him off that night. He started screaming and hollering at me. I got up, but he followed me ..."

"It didn't take long for me to realize that this man was intent on hurting me."

The police report that details what happened to Denton that night is graphic. For three hours, she tried to escape from her husband and the house, but her eyeglasses and car keys had been knocked away, and she was trapped.

All the while, Denton kept praying and thinking about how David had asked for God's power. "Yes, it was my body going through it, but I don't remember a lot of

pain," she says. "I remember thinking, 'I'm so calm...'"

When Logan's Chapel member Sharon Coppinger heard a knock later that night, she didn't recognize the woman standing at her door.

"You couldn't tell who she was ... Her face and hair were so messed up ... She didn't have anything on but a nightgown and her socks, which were dripping wet. She was shaking so hard. I said, 'Pam, is that you?'"

Denton had managed to escape from her husband, after finally finding her car keys. As she made her getaway, she remembered Coppinger's words on the church steps a few weeks earlier.

"I told her, 'If you ever need me, you don't have to call. Just come,'" says Coppinger, a nurse who was aware of Denton's increasingly volatile home life. "I knew it was going to lead to that."

Even after Denton's safe arrival at Coppinger's door, the night was long and difficult. After Coppinger had warmed and soothed her battered friend, they went to the emergency room and then to the justice center to speak with detectives. The husband was arrested on the charges of "domestic violence with assault" early the next morning.

Over the next months, church members would step up to Denton's aid. One family took her in for a few days. Another family found her a new home. Several men in the church moved her in. An overdue utility bill was paid anonymously. Donations were collected for Denton's other expenses. Robins and other church friends accompanied her to numerous court dates. Cards and phone calls lifted Denton through the difficult days to come.

"The greatest resource a church has is extending itself in love," says Robins. "I can't even think of what would have happened to Pam if she hadn't already been a part of the Body of Christ."

On a recent Sunday morning, Pam Denton is in the pulpit. She's telling the story of the anonymously paid utility bill, relating it to stewardship in the life of the church. It's clear that she is a strong witness in this church with 90 in average worship attendance.

"God is healing her and giving her a desire to share Christ with others," Robins says gently. "There's a freshness and newness about her witness that is invigorating."

There are still challenges, of course. Denton has weathered a long legal battle for her husband's recent conviction and a divorce that is expected to be final on Nov. 30. She still sleeps with her cell phone under her pillow, and her neighbors keep a watchful eye on her house.

Denton smiles nervously when asked about her new role as lay leader.

"I feel so overwhelmed and under-qualified," she says. "I'm just taking it one day at a time. My goal is to get up everyday and re-surrender my life to God."

But she is excited because her daughter has recently moved in with her and is expecting a baby daughter in February. She can't say enough about the church that "did exactly what the Body of Christ was instituted to do ... They've just engulfed me with so much love that I've never experienced before."

And she is looking forward to the holidays for the first time in a long while.

"There has been so much turmoil in my life for the past few years that I can't help but be thankful," she says. "I'm safe and secure in God, and I feel a joy in Christ."

"It's a real, incredible sense of thanksgiving." ■