

“Let’s Talk About…” is a column in our monthly newsletter where we will learn one thing at a time about how we can love others the way they want to be loved. We will learn something each month that helps us understand and respect people who are different from us a little more deeply.

Let's Talk About Name Changes

If you were in church this past Sunday, you know that I am now going by the name Faryn (pronounced “FAR-in,” like “far in the woods”). You may also know that my fiancée recently changed her name to Terra, and it is very possible we are not the only people you have journeyed with through a name change. So this month, let’s talk about name changes.

There are a multitude of reasons people choose to change their first name. For trans and nonbinary people, our given names may not fit our gender identities, and there are people who feel that their name needs to change to fit their identity in a way that has nothing to do with gender, too. There are also practical reasons for changing one’s first name, such as avoiding racial bias in a job search, evading a past abuser’s search efforts, or simply making a middle name into a first name since it’s what someone always goes by. This article [<https://www.huffpost.com/entry/legal-first-name-change-reasons-15d51f45fe4b0cfeed1a1f7a8>] shares the stories behind several people’s choices to change their name.

In the Bible, people usually change their name because God gives them a new name to mark a big shift in their lives. Abram becomes Abraham and Sarai becomes Sarah. Jacob becomes Israel. Saul started going by Paul for practical reasons, so that he’d have a more familiar-sounding name for his Gentile audiences. Then there’s Naomi, who asked the women of Bethlehem to call her Mara after her husband and sons died in Moab, because Naomi means pleasant and Mara means bitter, and bitter felt closer to the truth of her life at that point. At the end of the story, the townfolk call her Naomi once again, with good reason.

Although she ultimately returns to the name Naomi, I relate the most to Naomi-Mara’s experience with name changing. Both in choosing Mara and returning to be Naomi again, she outgrew one name and found another that could hold who she had become. In each moment, she chose the name that she felt fit her identity best. For me, neither of my names is bitter. Virginia was a beautiful name for a young girl who adored her Grandma, who loved Grandma so much that she learned to sign her name by copying Grandma’s signature, right down to the middle initial. My mom told me the name meant “pure pearl,” which is…close enough to the name meaning online search engines would offer.

And that’s the thing. For me, Virginia became a mask I had to wear, like Elsa in Frozen had to hide her powers. Virginia was the perfect church girl who knew all the Sunday School answers and never got in trouble and welcomed all those “problem” people with the strange sexualities and gender identities and mental health struggles but couldn’t possibly be anything like them. She was Grandma’s girl and the church-y kid, but nothing more.

So for a while, after I began to let myself be real in ministry, I tried going by V in some circles. V was openly bisexual and nonbinary. V openly challenged the institutional church’s shortcomings and never hesitated to question what was wrong with the systems that be. Going by V felt cool, but shallow. Ultimately V was really only “not Virginia.” That’s not a whole person; that’s just the character equivalent of a rebound relationship.

Then in January, I needed to name a character in a videogame, and since I was using the game to temporarily escape the pressure of writing lots of papers, I jokingly named my character “Faryn Awayn.” And the joke stopped being all that funny after a week or so, but that first name kept calling to me. It just felt…right, somehow. I looked it up and found out that Faryn is an old English name, used for both men and women, that means “adventurous.” And then I was sold.

Faryn is Virginia and V and more. Faryn is on an adventure and family and friends and church are all invited to come along. I certainly challenge processes like V, and I absolutely love my Grandma and the church as much as Virginia, and I am simply more than those names could contain. (I am also nonbinary, and Virginia

is among the most decidedly feminine names out there, and that is certainly another factor in this conversation about the “fit” of a name.)

This article is longer than usual because I thought it was important to share my story with you all. But I still want it to be about more than just me. This is a space for us to gain knowledge and skills for welcoming all kinds of people. So, how can we welcome people who use one name one week and a different one the next?

1. Remember there are lots of reasons people choose to change their first name, so the explanation that comes to your mind may not be correct. Some people love to share the story behind their name and others would rather not, so feel free to ask but in a way that allows the person to say no if they wish.
2. When someone tells you they’re changing their name, thank them for sharing the update, and then do your best to remember. It’s okay if you forget!!! I’ll tell you a secret: We forget our own names sometimes! It’s okay! What we really care about is your willingness to make an effort to learn to see us the way we are asking to be seen.
3. Finally, a memory tip: To learn a new name (either after a name change or just for a new person you’ve met), try to say their name at least 3 times in that first conversation where you learn it. Then, practice a couple more sentences with their name in your head. If you have another interaction with them and find you’ve forgotten, then after they remind you about their name, repeat!

Our “Let’s Talk About…” column is one place where we can help one another learn how to be better allies for all our neighbors. If you have a question you’d like answered, or if there are things you wish others in our congregation better understood about your own marginalized identities or those for whom you are already a strong ally, please submit suggestions to <https://forms.gle/E9eRqZJGLgVagbDZ9> or email me directly at virginiag@smokyhillumc.org.