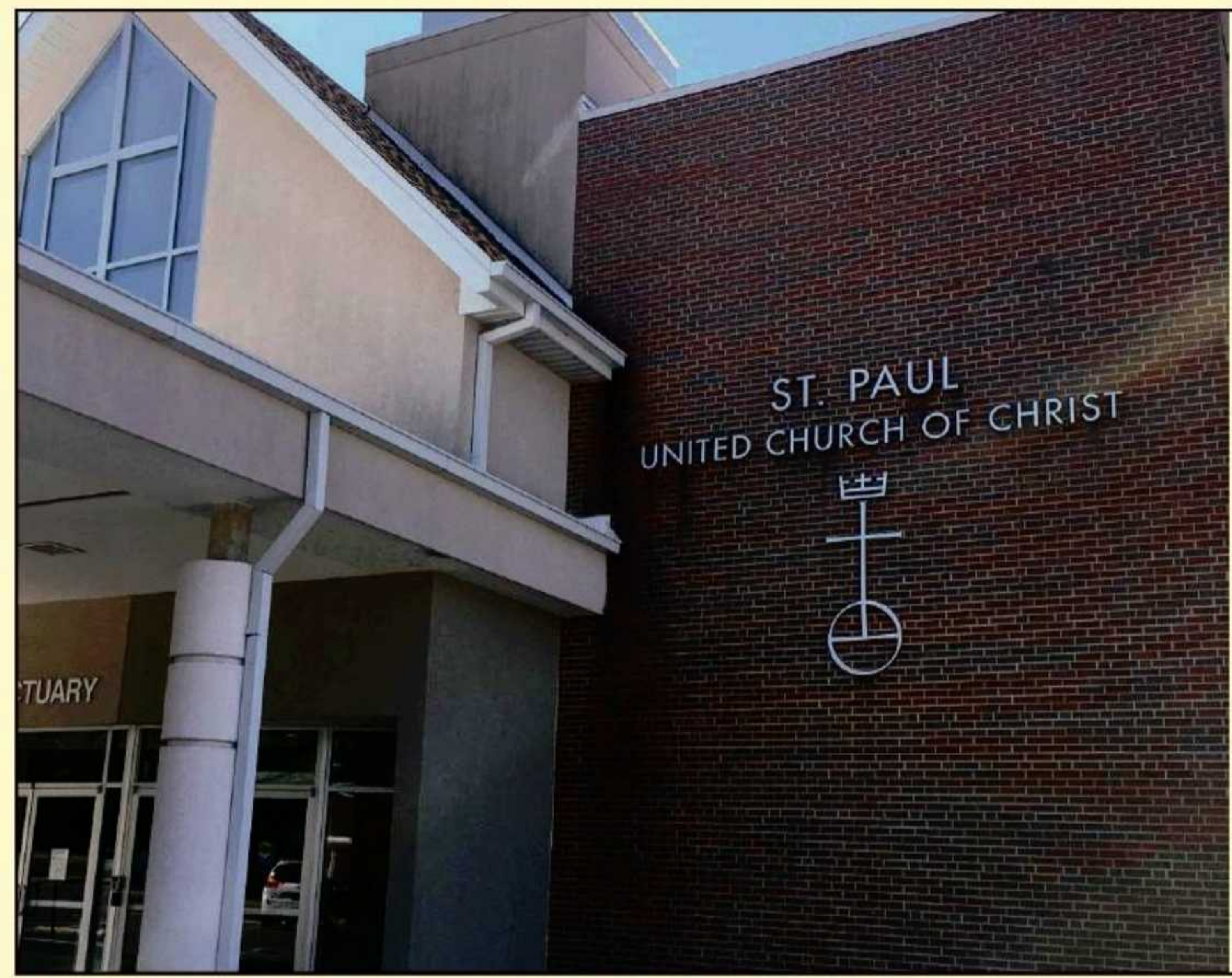


West Belleville native returns to city to lead St. Paul United Church of Christ

Suzanne Koziatek
Contributing Writer



St. Paul United Church of Christ is located at 115 W. B St. in downtown Belleville.

As the Rev. Michelle Torigian takes the pulpit at St. Paul United Church of Christ, she's also making a journey home.

Torigian, a west Belleville native, is returning to the city after years living out of state. She says the chance to lead a congregation in her own hometown, close to where her mom still lives, is a wonderful opportunity. But she was also drawn by the community at St. Paul.

"This congregation really loves the people of Belleville," Torigian says. "The church is very welcoming of all people, no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey."

Torigian grew up in the Ogles subdivision with her parents, both educators: her mom Laureen Torigian taught for many years at Our Lady Queen of Peace Catholic Church and her dad Vincent Torigian was a longtime history and civics teacher at Belleville West High School.

Michelle Torigian attended both schools, and went on to Fontbonne University, in preparation for a career in public relations. But after spending several years working in Florida, she returned to the St. Louis area with a new plan – the clergy.

"In my late 20s, I came to a vocational crossroads, and decided that this was where God was calling me to go," she says. "I'd always liked working with families, making hospital visits, helping people."

Torigian's faith life was at a crossroads as well. Having grown up attending an Episcopal church and a Catholic grade school, she found a new home in the UCC.

"Through the whole process of spiritual discovery, I attended different churches, eventually landing at the United Church of Christ," she says. "It's a denomination that's welcoming to all people – that's probably the shining factor of the denomination. It affirms the humanity and dignity and the image of God in all people."

Torigian received her master's degree in divinity from Eden Theological Seminary in 2010, and went on to become pastor of another St. Paul UCC, in Cincinnati, Ohio.

She also has been a prolific writer; her work has appeared in the Huffington Post and The Christian Century, and she's contributed to several books.

"I love writing, it's a big passion of mine," Torigian says. "And this gives me the chance to write quite a bit."

When she learned that the senior pastor's position at St. Paul's in Belleville was available, she asked to be considered for it, and went through the process of interviewing for the position.

News that she'd be returning to her hometown was especially happy for her mom, who still lives in Ogles. Her dad passed away last September. "My mom's ecstatic," Torigian says.

Since starting at the church last month, she's been working to connect with her congregation and get to know its needs. She says she's been impressed with how much St. Paul's reaches out to the community, through its participation in efforts like the Community Interfaith Food Pantry, and through opening its doors to various local groups. "They're really invested in this area."

Torigian plans to add to that investment, seeking out ways to reach people who are still looking for a church home here in the Metro East.

"I'll be trying some things to see how we can connect with people in the community, whether it's through

conversations in coffeehouses or pubs, or finding other ways to reach out," she says.

She notes that one of the biggest challenges to growing church membership in the 21st Century is time: Many families' lives are so overbooked that finding time for worship feels like a huge hurdle.

One way St. Paul and many other churches are trying to reach out to them is through social media – Torigian says the church is active on Facebook.

Torigian credits the staff and congregation at St. Paul's for helping smooth her way in her new church.

"I want to thank the people of the congregation for their gracious welcome," she says. "It's been a blessing to be able to serve them for this first month. The leadership and the staff have been wonderful; I've been grateful for their assistance as I get settled."

Want to go?

St. Paul United Church of Christ is located at 115 W. B St., Belleville. A traditional service is held at 9 a.m. on Sundays, with a relaxed, family-friendly celebration service following at 11 a.m.

The church is presenting its summer youth musical, "Annie Jr.," Aug. 10-12 at the church. Performances will be at 7 p.m. Friday and Saturday nights, and noon on Sunday. Admission is free; there will be a free will offering.

For more information about St. Paul's, visit the church's Facebook page or its website at stpaulucc.org



The Rev. Michelle Torigian is the new senior pastor of St. Paul United Church of Christ in Belleville. Torigian is a west Belleville native, who is returning to the area after several years as pastor of a church in Ohio.