

# Journey of Faith

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My journey of faith is bound up in the faith journey of my parents and the many communities that have shaped me along the way. My mother and father met in the United Campus Ministry at the University of Wisconsin in the late 1950's. My father would become the 6<sup>th</sup> generation in his family of southern farmers and educators to become a Presbyterian elder in the United States. My mother grew up in the city and was the third generation in her family to be born in the U.S. She became a Christian and Presbyterian through rebellion, as her parents, disillusioned with the church, told her that attending church was a waste of time. My father's rootedness and my mother's chosen embrace of the faith laid the foundation for my coming to know God.

We moved to Bryan, Texas when I was three and immediately became active in the life of First Presbyterian there. The church became my second home and the extended family I knew best, since my parents' families lived far away. Countless adults from multiple generations mentored and nurtured me in the faith. Dozens of peers were drawn together to form the community that helped me see the body of Christ take on flesh and blood around me. As doubts arose, I found a family and community ready to hear them, add new questions, share their own doubts, and help me discover my faith deepening through the questioning. Summer camps, youth conferences, and mission trip experiences all provided challenges and "mountaintop" experiences to enrich the weekly nourishment of faith I received through Bible Studies, Sunday School, worship and youth choir rehearsals.

Two experiences late in high school deepened my convictions and laid the groundwork for my sense of call to ministry. First, while on a hike with my associate pastor and members from our youth group, I nearly walked off the top of a Kitchen Mesa at Ghost Ranch in New Mexico. The cliff was high and the fall would have been devastating, likely deadly. Looking over the edge and talking with my associate pastor, John McGarey, I was filled with awe, a sense that God wasn't finished with me, and the realization that it was important for me to learn what God wanted to do with my life. Second, about a year later, John's wife, Bobbie (also a PCUSA pastor), asked me what I was going to do with my life. When I replied that I was going to be a pediatrician, she reiterated that her interest was not in what *job* I would have, but in what I would *do* with my life. After thinking about it for a few days, I told her that I felt called to work with kids and heal people, and I asked her if that was good enough for her. She affirmed that it was, as long as I remembered it *that* way.

During my junior year in college, while deeply involved in United Campus Ministry (UCM) at Texas A&M, I found my direction changing from pediatrics to ministry in the church as I realized that youth were in need of healing in ways that medicine cannot address. UCM, under the creative and pastoral guidance of Mike Miller, helped me discover the depth of God's grace and love in new ways and helped me realize that my calling was to love others, without worrying about whether or not they loved me in return. I look back on that year as "the year God put a blitz on me"—bringing many people into my life (peers and adults) to point me towards God's calling to serve full-time in the church.

Following college, I spent a year and a half in Merida, Yucatan, Mexico serving the Presbyterian church under the mentorship of Rev. Don Wehmeyer. That time was also rich and transformational for me. Over the course of that brief time, I was awed by the faith of youth and adults I met in the church in Mexico, as they faced social and economic consequences for embracing Christian faith in a Protestant church. I was also confronted with the awareness that much of what I considered to be convictions of my faith was actually more rooted in American culture than in Christianity. Both of these realizations drove me to try to live out my faith more fully and deeply.

From there, I moved to Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur (Greater Atlanta), GA, which provided for an extraordinary opportunity to set a well-examined foundation for the ministry that would follow for me. It helped expose many of my assumptions about how to read the Bible, how to live out the faith, and how to help others encounter God. After receiving the three-year Master's of Divinity degree from Columbia, I spent 15 months doing Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) as a chaplain resident at Grady Memorial Hospital in downtown Atlanta. This led me down new roads of dealing with grief, learning the difference between pain and suffering, and learning how important it was to people in health crises to know that God was with them in their time of trouble.

My first ordained ministry call was to Lake Murray Presbyterian in Chapin, SC (the second suburb NW of Columbia), where I served as an associate pastor. It was an exhilarating and exhausting five years in ministry as the church grew rapidly, built a new sanctuary, and was desperately understaffed. The congregation loved Nadia and I through the joys and challenges of becoming parents first to Austin and then, two years later, to Joshua and Alexis. In my time at Lake Murray, I was confronted with my weaknesses and limitations, but also learned important things about my strengths and about how to invite a diverse team of people to work together to make a ministry stronger than it could possibly be under the leadership of any one of them. I enjoyed most the work I was able to do with the youth of the church and the mission leadership I was able to provide in leading our congregation on mission trips into Mexico and leading the churches of our community to build the first two Habitat for Humanity houses in Chapin. On a personal level, becoming a father filled my life with love, joy, and an awe at God's grace and unconditional love in ways that I never could have imagined or understood before. The ways my children were transforming me helped prepare me to take my next step in ministry.

Just eight months after our twins were born, we moved to Sand Springs, OK, where I became the pastor of First Presbyterian Church. This congregation helped me to discover my pastoral identity more completely, learn to work with a session of highly committed members, and improve in a variety of pastoral competencies. Their loving and candid feedback kept me encouraged while also stretching me to develop gifts and abilities further. I discovered more deeply in that setting that to become the pastor I was *called* to be, I had to allow my images of the pastor I thought I *should* be to die. I also discovered that I could not create my own job security—the only security I would have would come from God. My job was to focus on serving Christ as faithfully as possible and to leave the rest to God. As my anxiety diminished, my joy, courage, and focus in serving grew. We learned together ways that were better and worse for working through conflict. At the same time, we discovered the hunger in our community for a church that communicated consistently in word and deed the grace of God while inviting members to grow in faithfulness and joy.

In early 2011, a new door opened for me to serve as the pastor of Covenant. Little did I know at that time how much of my time, energy, and focus over the next five years would go into walking with our congregation through a \$2.4 million renovation of about half of our existing square footage. Little could I have imagined what a joyful enterprise this would be for our congregation, how well everything would turn out, and how much fun I would have along the way! I certainly couldn't have fathomed the leadership and commitment provided by dozens upon dozens of members, each sharing their unique gifts, experiences and perspectives, allowing the power of Christ within us "to accomplish abundantly far more than all we could ask for or imagine" (Eph. 3:20). The huge undertaking has brought us together as a congregation in many ways and helped us to appreciate the vast array of gifts and experiences God has brought together to be Christ's body at this time and in this place. Now that the work of rebuilding our physical facilities is largely complete, I am excited about the time and energy I will have to turn my focus back more fully to the lives of people!

We Presbyterians care deeply about theology. We care about our connectedness to one another and want there to be a visible unity in our sharing faith convictions and practices of discipleship. Truth be known, we are far more united than we often realize, both in our theology, in our faith practices, and in our positions on social issues. Our tendency, though, has been to focus on differences and think that those differences make us incompatible. My growing conviction over the years is that all things must ultimately yield to the twin commands of loving God with our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves. Jesus more pointedly taught both that we are to "love one another" and to "love our enemies." I have come to believe that the yearning for "like-mindedness," while natural, must be resisted. I believe it to be heresy to value "like-mindedness" over our call to love.

As this next stage in my ministry in Covenant allows me to turn my attention more fully to loving one another and loving people who have not yet discovered God's grace and love for them, I feel pressed to ask myself if I inadvertently and unknowingly overlook or avoid some people. A particular concern is whether there are people who feel unwelcomed in most, if not all, churches. If so, I wonder how we might become a congregation that more fully embraces its call to love. While any call can be both exhilarating and unnerving, I hold to the promise from the letter to the Ephesians that Christ, "*by the power at work within us* is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine." Now, that's pretty amazing and it frees us to have great hope and the courage to dream dreams.