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Central Journal

Stories of Central Presbyterian Church

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The Central Journal Team:

JACK BARDEN

JEFFREY CHEREWATY

JOYCE HARMON

BARBARA MILLER



“I don’t know.”

Ian Crooks

When I was very young, my Dad would gather my brothers and sisters together each night right before bedtime, and have us all kneel in a semi-circle facing him. He would sit forward in his chair and lead us through a series of rote prayers from the Catholic tradition, all done with our little heads bowed, eyes closed and our hands pressed tightly together, steeple style. In addition to the well-known Hail Mary’s and Our Father’s, there were prayers that involved blessing each one of our family and extending that blessing outward from there. In unison, we children would chant, “God bless Mommy and Daddy, Stephen, Desmond, Ian, Diane and Gwen; grandpas and grandmas, aunties and uncles, cousins and friends; bishops and priests, monks and nuns and all who minister to the Holy Catholic Church...,” which would lead onward to the prayer that stated, “if I die before I wake, I pray, Thee, Lord, my soul to take...,” (something that would send me off to bed feeling a little uncomfortable!). At that very young age, (and I admit, well into my adult life), it all seemed like ritual without any meaning, a superficial hope and a wish without any substance or life.

I spent the better part of my life wanting nothing to do with organized religion. It seemed such a waste of time and, well, fake. It was ironic, then, that as a young adult trying to scrape together a living as a musician, I found work as a director of music for a large Catholic Church and had a source of steady income, as well as a chance to help create beautiful liturgical music. Every Sunday, I would listen to beautiful, ornate and potentially powerful passages and prayers pointing in the direction of the glory of God, enveloped by incense, but it all felt dull and lifeless to me.

An ongoing surprise to me, the songs were inspirational, encouraging and at times, wise. I put together a Christian band named “Sons of the Father,” and with three other guys, would provide music for large charismatic, nondenominational gatherings. It was exciting, but I felt conflicted, because what I was ‘sharing’ regarding faith and spirituality with others felt completely counterfeit to me.

At some point, I became attracted to the writings of a Chinese philosopher, Lao Tzu who spoke of a power (the Tao) that was eternal, limitless, and the source of all things,

... Ian Crooks

formed and formless. Lao Tzu would point out that the Tao that was spoken of was not the eternal Tao. I realized that words and concepts could actually keep me from a direct experience of the divine. Tentatively, I began trying to discard my desire to control what spirituality did or didn't look like. It was not easy and more often than not, I would fail and find myself churning away, trying yet again to manipulate or discredit the Unknown.

If you ever want a crash course in how busy a mind can be, undertake the study of psychotherapy! In working with patients while training as a psychiatrist, I discovered that we are all awash in a sea of mental activity: thoughts, images, beliefs, perceptions, fears and anxieties, and from those waves that crash upon the shore of our awareness, comes our experience of life. I began to understand that how we feel and experience life doesn't come from 'out there' but is actually being generated, moment by moment, by what we are doing 'in here,' by the way in which we are relating to the activity and contents of our mind. In essence, we are giving meaning to everything we see! Busy minds!

I began to understand that humans seem to have two ways of using their mind to create their experience of life. One involves lots of processing and analyzing. This mode of thinking is typically experienced as stressful, churning and effortful. By way of contrast, we can also tap into a freer, more flowing mode of thinking. This mode is typically experienced as quiet, relaxing, and peaceful. It is also the source of insight and wisdom and in following its guidance, we seem to navigate more smoothly through life.

It is my faith and trust that this more free flowing mind is our connection to the divine. It is my belief that our true mental and emotional health and well being is found when we are willing to let go of the endless churning of the processing mind. We can then enter into the ever available spiritual essence that is already built into us by an infinite intelligence or creative source that knows no limits, that is both the source of the formless and the formed. We enter that experience when we are willing to say "I don't know..." and quiet our minds enough to allow fresh insights and wisdom to bubble up in our awareness, gifts of the divine. It is something that can never be earned or accomplished by techniques, rituals or entreaties. It is the Kingdom of God within. And it is there that we realize the advice of sages who say, "Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable...if anything is excellent or praiseworthy, think about such things"

(Philippians 4:8), and "In Him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

I reflect on the seemingly pointless process put into motion by my now deceased Dad, a deeply religious man. How I now appreciate his effort. I think about the many ways I innocently tried to define, control and struggle against the very thing I wanted most, a sense of connection with the greater Whole. It is my intention now to live my life as it is happening, right now, the only time there truly is. Grounded in the present moment, open to recognizing the limitations of my processing mind and choosing to slow down enough to be aware of the gentle, wise and creative spirit that is my true self. For me, it begins with, "I don't know..." and ends with "Amen." ♪



“I know God.”

Margaret Harren

Over many years so many individuals and incidents have contributed to my journey of faith that I could write a book. But I won't. Instead I want to share what I have learned and how I have learned about my personal faith.

I know God.

I see Her in the intricate design and ever-changing beauty of Her creation.

I hear Her voice in the reading and study of scripture.

I meet Her in the life and teachings of Jesus.

I experience Her with people.....

Those who have loved me and those I have loved.

Those who have taught me and those I have taught.

Those who have served me and those I have served.

Those who have cared for me and those for whom I have cared.

Those whose lives, words, and works have inspired and enlightened me.

I was blessed to grow up in a Christian family who were part of a small community church. In that congregation people of many protestant traditions worshiped and served

together. Children and youth were nurtured and challenged to explore their beliefs.

As a college student I found a home in the Presbyterian Church. Since that time, in six local congregations my faith has developed. In the familiar comfort of the church my faith has been challenged, beliefs rejected, and new ideas explored. The church has given strength, caring, and comfort at times of personal trials. Through regular corporate worship the church has helped keep my life centered. The church has opened doors for serving and windows to a larger world.

In my life and in my faith there is little certainty. But this one thing I know.

I know God. ♪



“God provided me with the strength of mind, peace in my heart, and an incredible experience.”

Shelley Kasiske

I grew up Presbyterian, attending the First Presbyterian Church of Chili, NY. For years, my mother organized VBS and I was persuaded to participate: painting signs, crafting props for the week, and of course, volunteering to work with the kids. My mom also took up the role of Jr High Sunday School teacher and Jr High Youth Leader once I hit High School. (Crafty, a dedicated volunteer, and mentor to youth – it’s in my genes!)

I was able to go on my first Youth Mission Trip at the age of 13. We traveled every-other-year to an interdenominational work camp. During the day we’d work in the community, building wheelchair ramps, painting, siding a house, etc. with 5-10 strangers from other groups, then returned to worship as a group, along with devotionals with our home church. It was a great way to meet others, learn about the faith of those around me, and to really get to know the community that I was serving.

My second mission trip was to West Virginia. The boys in my group brought an electric razor, and several of them attempted to shave their heads one night. As you might

imagine, the boys first shaved shapes into at least one head before fully shaving it – and then ran out of batteries! After massive panic, they found another attendee that brought clippers. At that point, several boys started teasing me, “Shelley, I’ll give you \$10 if you shave your head.” Cha-ching! The financially sophisticated budgeter in me couldn’t live down an opportunity to earn a little cash. After all, it would grow back, right? By the end of the week, the Spirit moved me to promise my Youth Group that I would shave my head by the time I graduated high school and donate all the proceeds to the Mission Trip fund.

I shaved my head after my last exam of my junior year of high school. I collected the debts promised, and received more than what I initially imagined. My grandfather was especially proud of me, and always visited with some cash. He wanted to help with the fundraising, and I was charging \$1 for anyone to rub my head. In the end, I collected a total of \$750 from friends, proud relatives, head rubs, and even my crew at Triennium that summer!

In high school, I co-led a team of 4 youth to give the first

... Shelley Kasiske


all-youth-led church service. Aside from consulting with our pastor to verify the bulletin outline and passages, there were no other adults or sponsors involved. We proposed the Youth-led service, selected the scripture, wrote the prayers & sermon, and assigned roles. As we continued, we dubbed ourselves the Cool (Children of our Lord) Group. Over time, I wrote several sermons and led multiple services. At the age of 18, I successfully completed my Girl Scout Gold Award project by creating a Cool Group in a neighboring Presbyterian church.

Sundays were tough to go to church in college. But every Tuesday night, I went to Cooper House, the Presbyterian Campus ministry, for a home cooked meal and community building. I jumped at the opportunity to go on my first international Mission Trip with Cooper House during Spring Break of my sophomore year. We drove to DC, and were set to depart for Guatemala the next day. There, I had to make a difficult decision. My grandfather (the one who was proud of my head-shaving bravery – really, proud of everything I did) was on his deathbed. He had a bad fall months earlier, and I hadn't seen him since before that spill. My options were to fly to Rochester to say goodbye, or to go to Guatemala for a life-changing, faith-strengthening experience. I made a teary phone call to his hospital room and said goodbye, talking to him for as long as I could. I told him I was going to go to Guatemala for him, so he could be proud of me once again. Upon arrival in Guatemala, I bought a candle to light during my nightly reflection. And although I was countries away from my family, they were in my heart and in the candle's flame. Throughout that week, God provided me with the strength of mind, peace in my heart, and an incredible experience. I am still astonished at how much God calmed me that week, how much I was able to live in the moment, and how close to my family I felt when I gazed into the flickering candle and the Guatemalan stars.

I attended CPC during my first weekend living in Austin (July 2008). Although it was my plan to church shop, I heard an announcement that day: There was still time to join the mission trip to El Salvador. Three weeks later, I was committed to go – and the trip was less than a month away at that point! I wouldn't have been able to commit without my experiences in Guatemala.

In January 2010, I was encouraged to be a Youth Group Sponsor. I initially wanted to be an observer of the Youth Group, but those plans changed quickly. We have had three successful Mission Trips to date, and I dubbed myself head fundraiser and budgeter early on. Before our first mission

trip in 2012, each participant was asked why they were going. One response that stuck in my head is this: "Because others have been helping me my whole life. It is time for me to give back and help someone else." These CPC kids – they make my heart grow.

My faith can be a roller coaster at times. For those very low-lows, I gain inspiration from the people around me. I think about my creative mother, my supportive grandfather, and all that the Youth have taught me. I reflect on my past, on the mission trips that I've taken, and on the strangers that I've met. And I think of a candle lit under the Guatemalan stars. 



“Lord, I believe, help my unbelief.”

John Nyfeler

My life and faith experience...my story

Born in Dallas in 1935, the second son of George L. Nyfeler, Sr., a United States Border Patrolman and Ruth Vernon Nyfeler, an elementary school teacher, I grew up agreeably in the comfort of the Methodist Church in the 1940’s and 50’s in Eagle Pass and Del Rio, Texas; a relatively remote, quiet and safe part of the world.

Historical Chronology

I graduated from High School in 1953 in Del Rio; an unremarkable scholar but with active involvement in academics, sports, choral and theater arts, and school publications. In that upbringing, the Methodist Church continued to be a central part of my life and that of my family. I entered The University of Texas at Austin, School of Architecture in 1953 and completed a five-year professional degree program in 5-1/2 years in 1958. I married Sue McBee in 1956 and we had four children, one of whom, John Howard, died a tragic crib death in 1959. I practiced in the design professions in Austin and Dallas, returning permanently to Austin in 1983.

The People Who made a difference

My life is, and has been, and I expect will continue to be, profoundly influenced by the Church and its people. It is those people around me who have touched my life that have made a difference. I have come to know that, like me, no one is perfect and that remarkable things can and do come out of the lives of us imperfect people.

The Church

The Church has continually been a part of my life. My mother, Ruth was the daughter of and sister of Methodist ministers. My upbringing regularly included my place in the Church. A grandfather, uncles and cousins were and are in the ministry.

I am very grateful to the youth programs of the Methodist Church of the late 40’s and early 50’s that left me with that personal historic event I identify as the time I came to know Jesus as Savior. The experience was then, and is now, unambiguous although I understand that event differently

... John Nyfeler

now after over seventy years of life in the Church.

The Presbyterian Church has given me opportunities for service as Deacon and Elder, as a teacher, in choir and social service. Church, for me, is not a dull life.

Central Presbyterian Church

In about 1986, I came to Central from University Presbyterian Church following a failed marriage. In the divorce division of assets, she got the church. Central was a refuge in the time of my life upset at the ending of a 30-year marriage. This congregation has provided unmatched support in the reordering of my life.

When I re-married in 1994 the people at Central warmly embraced my wife Sally Fly and our daughter, Chelsea. This was most important as Chelsea, at 11 or 12 when her adult person was emerging, knew she was gay. Central Presbyterian Church was then and is the most gracious and supportive community for Chelsea's, or any person's coming out. Life at Central was also abundantly instructive for us parents contending with the predictable anxiety surrounding that family transition.


The Mystery

I know the Christian profession of faith and know the answers to the fundamental questions and I am at home in the Christian tradition. What remains for me though, is the mystery of the Church. How can it be that the created can know the Creator?

I see then, as a paradox, one of the most destructive forces in the world is absolute certainty. I can find none. My life as a Christian has been, over time, a becoming comfortable with uncertainty, and being content with the mystery. Yet, for me, there is still assurance in the truth of the parable of the Good Samaritan showing that human sympathy is more important than doctrine.

Further, there have been in my life, occasions and events that beg for Providence to be the only possible explanation. Chance? No. Those times have been too direct to be just happenstance. Yet, how can this be?

Central Church is a crowd of diverse people who make a place where mystery can remain, and uncertainty can exist. The scripture passages that ring most true in my life's experience are those such as, "...Lord, I believe, help my unbelief." And I can share with the early disciples' response to their encounters with Jesus, as told in the books of Acts, Luke and Matthew "...and they were amazed and mystified... perplexed..." and "...what can this mean?"

So, after all of that, this Church is where I belong. 



“The love and nurturing has been genuine and constant.”

Luis Ortiz

During my life I always have struggled with the doctrinal concept of “predestination”. The idea of a loving God pre-selecting those who will be saved from condemnation sounds contradictory with being “deliberately diverse and fully inclusive”. Reflecting on my faith journey I have been lately playing with the thought that maybe I was predestined to be a “Presbyterian” before I was born.

Going back when the Presbyterian missionaries evangelized the western part of Puerto Rico (in the early years of the twentieth century), my grandfather was one of the children attending Sunday school at the new founded mission in my hometown. He grew up and became a faithful leader of the church. My father followed his footsteps and raised my family in the Presbyterian faith. One of his major contributions was to be a liaison in relocating to our sanctuary a bell from a church that was destroyed by the air raids during World Word Two. (This I called saved by the bell!)

During my formative years I seldom missed Sunday school because I was fascinated with the biblical stories and heroes even when they sometimes didn’t make sense to

me. I constantly annoyed my teachers by asking questions like: Why the dinosaurs were not mentioned in the creation? Why God wants to destroy the earth? Are the Indians saved even when they didn’t have the opportunity to hear the gospel? How about people who love their neighbors but have different beliefs? And my favorite one was: We are humans, therefore sin is inevitable, so why sin is permitted by God? As you can tell my lovely (but conservative) church had plenty of patience with my rebellious mind.

I was blessed to be involved with the church during my adolescence. Youth group, mission trips, summer camps, fellowship, bible studies, and benevolent pastors were instrumental in shaping my faith. I developed long lasting friendships and relationships that still are active without the need of Facebook or any other social media tool.

One of the things that never let me get fully involved in church leadership was the need of control that some churches try to impose on their members. I clearly remember on my confirmation class when I was told that as members we were forbidden to attend parties, concerts

... Luis Ortiz

and listening to mundane music. I stand up and asked the session “Since when we became the Footloose church?” They answered back that Christians were not supposed to be in darkness but I fired back and said “We are the light of the world and the light shines in the darkness”. I think the vote was really close and barely passed. (Again, predestined to be a Presbyterian!)

Then, I was selected as a presbytery delegate to attend the 1983 Youth Triennium at Purdue University. I can say that this was the experience that reaffirmed my commitment with God. For the first time I was exposed to a progressive church looking for change and inclusiveness. I learned about what boycotts and active social action means and that economic status, race and sexual orientation were not impediments to live a joyful Christian life. I went to various workshops where the attendees shared similar questions that I had been struggling with. I returned to my hometown pumped and eager to start a revolution but resistance was futile!

College years came by and for the first two years I lived at the seminary dorms across the university campus. I found a peaceful oasis for studying and shared with the seminarians long and deep conversations about faith and religion. They were open, smart and friendly. They do know how to have fun and I quickly learned they were not cloistered monks!

For my junior year I went to UMASS as an exchange student to polish my English skills and experience an independent life. I joined several social justice movements like marching against the apartheid in South Africa and nuclear arms control. At the same time I joined the Campus Crusade for Christ group. It was fun sharing the gospel and trying to make disciples for God’s army during the 1986 Spring Break at Daytona beach while participating in the MTV Concerts and festivities. That’s what I call Christian multitasking!

During my dental school years going to church was not among my top priorities. My spiritual practices were more personal and short but while immersed in science study I was convinced that only the Holy Spirit was responsible to make the human body machine work.

Right after graduation I joined the Army Medical Officers and married my wife Zulma. I gladly remember how a Presbyterian couple mentored us and made those years easier to cope with. Although it was an honor to serve the country I left the Army because war was against my beliefs.

We returned to Puerto Rico where I established my

practice and thought we would settle down forever, but there were other plans on the way. After ten years we decided to relocate to Austin. It was hard to leave behind the natural beauty and comfort of our island but was a necessary move. It was a leap of faith and in August 2007 we were starting a new life here without friends and family. We started visiting churches (Presbyterians of course!) but it was on a cold January Sunday morning that we felt the warm body of Christ again. After the wonderful service pastor Greg invited us to join the potluck at Smoot Hall. There he asked for birthdays and my oldest son raised his hand. The church sang Happy Birthday and he was happy. On the way home he said that we finally found our new church. (The power of Presbyterian potlucks making its evangelistic work!)

We started to attend regularly and then came SXSW, Easter, Pentecost, Mo-Ranch, Hanging of the greens, etc. Then in 2009 we joined as a family and baptized our two sons at the sanctuary. This church has become our family here in Texas. The love and nurturing has been genuine and constant. My sons love to be here and you all have been the village needed to raise them. My wife’s flan has become a famous and gourmet dish. You have given me the opportunity to develop leadership skills by serving on the session as an elder. My home church was kind of “incredulous” but very happy that I finally decided to serve.

Personally I haven’t changed questioning and challenging my faith. I do feel that I found a place not a perfect one with perfect people but one that has abundant love and compassion to share. I will always struggle with “predestination” but I give thanks to God that this destination was scheduled in my journey of faith. ♪