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Central Journal

Stories of Central Presbyterian Church

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“Your faith journey isn’t taken alone.”

Carlie Tilley

I have had many faith journeys during my lifetime. Just as each lifetime has stages so does my faith journey. I will start with the beginning.

My parents believed in God but not in “organized religion” so we didn’t attend church. We went to weddings, funerals, and other special occasions but that was it. I remember being baptized when I was in 4th or 5th grade, but I didn’t know what being baptized meant at that time. I did attend church sporadically when going with friends and their family at various times during my growing up years. So I attended many different churches. My Dad was in the Air Force so we moved every three years. I had to pull up stakes, get used to a new school, make new friends, learn new areas of the world, new customs, languages, etc. It was a nomadic lifestyle. So I got used to not being too attached so that it wouldn’t hurt too much when the move came.

When I got married (I met him in Tripoli, Libya, he was a GI there), he was a non-practicing Catholic. We never went to church, except for the wedding, and the christening/baptism of our two children. At a certain point

during my 15 years of marriage, I felt something missing in my life. I needed something, but couldn’t figure out what it was. I was happily married at that time, just felt emptiness inside. So I thought I’d try going to church. After all, the kids were of an age to start going to Sunday school, so why not! My husband said he would not attend church with me, so I didn’t go to the Catholic one; I went to the Presbyterian one instead. I really liked the two preachers and the message they were giving. It was a lot like CPC. The people were very open, friendly, warm, and welcoming. I attended Sunday school, went to church every Sunday, worked with the kids programs, attended Bible studies, etc. I didn’t become an Elder or Deacon; I somehow felt I needed to know more before I did that. There was a program using a room in the church as an office that worked with prison inmates and I helped out doing office stuff for that program as well. I helped in the church office when the secretary went on vacation. Anyway in doing all of this, I felt it was the beginning of my faith journey, I was on the road moving toward something good and exciting.

... Carlie Tilley

When my marriage fell apart, I was lost. I was really lost. I couldn't find anything worthy inside of myself for a while. Then I took a deep breath and did what the preachers always say. I opened my life to God and said, "What do you want me to do?" It took a little while, but suddenly I felt like a load had been lifted from my shoulders and I felt worthy again. I realized I wasn't the problem, the situation was the problem. I was OK! I could make good decisions again, and I could control what was happening to my kids and me.

Ever since then, when I have worries/troubles/uncertainties, I take a deep breath, look up, and I say something like, "Help, is this what you want me to do?" And I just let Him take control. It works! It really works! He has rescued me many times and I'm sure there will be other times in the future.

Now, when a thought pops into my head, I listen. I think, "Is this what you want me to do? OK, I can do it, I will do it." One of those thoughts happened a few months ago, and so now I go to Central Mission on the second Thursday of each month to do sewing repairs for the homeless who show up that day. It is really just a little thing to me, but such a big thing for them.

Wow, I guess I told you the beginning of my faith journey and the latest in what I consider my journey. I guess I think the start of the journey doesn't seem to be a giant step, but it makes a giant impact when it is taken. So, my advice to everyone is to take that step, it will make a difference both to you and to someone else. Because your faith journey isn't taken alone, it always has an effect on others. ♡



“I found a place that I felt would help me rediscover my link to God and my need for God’s presence.”

Bear Cole

I grew up the youngest child of a dedicated father and a hardworking, strong, enduring mother. My father was a funeral director, mortician, and Southern Baptist pastor and lived wherever he could make enough to support our family. My Mom did various jobs; a fore(w)man in the Louisiana State Highway Department, she built and set headstones, and drove cross country in her beloved freightliner named “Ben.” Both were always there to care for their brood of unruly PKs. We lived in 20 different towns by the time I was 13, and having never lived anywhere long enough to set roots or develop real friendships my siblings, parents, and I became a very tight-knit group. Though we stomped all over the state of Louisiana we eventually returned to Texas, my birth-state, and home to my family.

My father, whose own father was a Nazarene pastor, grew up in that strict faith whereas my Mom grew in my grandfather’s Methodist tradition, her family having left my grandmother’s Jewish heritage back in Germany after WWII. My mother became Baptist after marrying my father, and my grandmother, caring for me during all school

holidays, raised me with the lessons and practices of her Jewish faith. To this day I still consider myself more Jewish than anything else. My grandmother taught me about life and living, goodness and mercy, giving and providing for others. Her lessons stay within my heart and echo in my life daily when I make bread, say a prayer, clean my house, or talk to God.

Personally, my faith and practices of faith have been all over the board. Religious, not religious, dogmatic or not, eastern and western... I have seen and done quite a bit. My father died when I was 13 and with his passing, and the strict rules he had given us going away, I was able to explore different avenues of faith and religion to find a place in which I could fit. In high school I dabbled with paganism, it seemed more welcoming to a budding gay young man, and after I discovered the calm peace of Buddhism I stuck with that for a while. I continued going to temple with my grandmother and church with my mother as regularly as I had to.

... Bear Cole

When my boyfriend of seven years died, I started getting angry with God. I didn't believe I would ever overcome the pain. I packed up my car, cashed out my savings, and left. I didn't tell my family or friends where I was going; I just needed to leave. I found myself heading west and eventually landed in Seattle. I stayed there for six weeks. When I left Seattle I had very little to my name other than some clothes, my car, and cash to get me back home. I didn't go home, though. I went to New York. After an aimless month of staying on a relative's couch, she gave me an ultimatum. I had to get my act together, start seeing a therapist, or I had to go home. She would pay for either one but I had to choose. I chose the therapy. I was tired of feeling so much hate and pain and sadness and I was ready to move on.

I dealt with a lot of my confusion about what I believed. I was raised in so many different ways and had gone down so many different avenues I didn't know where to stand anymore. God and I weren't talking; I was too mad, too hurt, and too unwilling to get past my own issues to be open to God again. My therapist then fired herself. I was at a place where I had to make decisions for myself and I decided to come back to Texas. I drifted for a few years, returning to church at the Cathedral of Hope in Dallas, but eventually I made it down to Austin. In Austin, five years after Kevin's death and within a month of moving into the city full time, I met Gil. I was still in shock and broken, bitter and angry, but I wanted to try for something deeper again. Gil helped open me back to love.

I began feeling the stirrings of God in my life, once more, and then I felt something stronger. A call. One to which I did not want to answer. I began seeing it, hearing it, and feeling it in my life almost daily, I was meant for the church, to be a minister and the harder I fought it the harder things became for me. It was only when I finally crumbled, gave in, and entertained the idea of being a minister that the hardships disappeared and things lined up. I didn't know where I was supposed to go, who I was supposed to minister, or even how I would achieve the end result but I knew that there was something out there for me. I began searching for a seminary in Texas that was open and accepting to the LGBT community in its churches and church practices. I came upon Austin Seminary and was intrigued by the Presbyterian Church. I had never been a part of liturgical services before, and never sat through a service that was so high church and traditional as what I read about the Presbyterian denomination. One Sunday morning, I got on Google and searched for a church in Austin that was LGBT

friendly. The first result was Central, a coincidence it was Presbyterian, and so we got ready and showed up. The love I felt, the goodness I experienced, the music I heard... all of it beckoned to me to come back. It was the home I had been searching for nearly 9 years to find. That first Sunday I wept because I found a place that I felt would help me rediscover my link to God and my need for God's presence and guidance once again.

Here Gil and I are, two years later, and I am preparing to start seminary, we are active within the church, and this family of faith have helped us grow up and grow together and deeper into our own relationship. Gil's support, God's love, and a whole lot of patience came up to me and knocked down those last few walls that I had kept all the years. I look forward to more years within this community. ♪



“Following Jesus’ footsteps, I have grown in my faith.”

Ann Hooks

When I was a little child, I sang “Jesus Loves Me”, and as a youth I sang “In the Garden”. As an adult I continued to sing “How Great Thou Art”. The years have passed and I continue to sing as an old lady of 93 years - God’s love has never left me.

I was baptized at 12 years of age at Second Presbyterian Church in Houston, and I’ve been a member of Presbyterian churches in Houston, Midland, Corpus Christi, Little Rock, Arkansas and Coral Gables Florida. In Austin, Texas, I’ve been a member of Central Presbyterian Church for forty-two years, and an associate member of St Mark’s United Methodist, here in my neighborhood in north Austin. I have been a member of the Women’s Circles most of my adult life, and have attended Sunday School classes during all the years.

I have grown in my faith and overcome most of my prejudices and loved my neighbors more each day. I know them as God’s creation, and as I learned long ago, “He’s Got The Whole World In His Hands”. My friends have been deacons and elders in the church, and have been a real influence on me as I have walked this journey.

On October 30, 1941, I married Thom Hooks and we

joined one another on this journey of sixty years together. We were proud parents of two sons, Benton Browder Hooks, born August 9, 1948 and Fred Carlyle Hooks, born January 31, 1951.

The ministers of all the churches have been my friends, showing their love for me and all of God’s children.

During the World War II years and the 1940s, I did not attend church very regularly, but after our sons were baptized in the 1950s, we became regular attending members of Sunday School and church as a family, and the journey continued.

We have two grandsons, Kyle and Kendall, one great-granddaughter Leah Ann, and Megan and Victoria as daughters-in-law [loves]. As of March 29, 2014, Kendall and Victoria will be married, and Kyle will be the pastor officiating at the wedding service for his brother Kendall. Kyle and Megan have been married for five years. Kyle is an Associate Pastor at Angelo Bible Church in San Angelo, Texas.

The Lord has been so good to me all of my life, and I will continue to love Him and strive to follow Him. How blessed can an Old Lady of 93 years be? ♪



“God has seen me through all of it, and perhaps even directed my life around it.”

Janine Zabriskie

In my experience, the trickiest thing about a sense of call is that it seems better understood in hindsight than foresight. It’s usually not the answer to, “where am I going?,” but rather, “how did I get here?” Often, life has felt like a series of jerky, jagged turns with no clear direction or endpoint visible. When I look back, however, it seems to be a broad arc, with each step leading to the next place I needed to go. While I sometimes wonder why the Lord used such a circuitous route, I can now see I’m right where I am supposed to be, and needed to take the long and winding path to get here.

As a high school senior in upstate New York, I was absolutely certain of what I wasn’t going to do. I resolutely stated many times, “I will not be a teacher or a minister. There are too many in my family already, and I want to do something different.” I did, in fact, have a family full of them – my father, grandfather, aunt. A great-uncle who had been an ordained minister, and then turned to the Charismatics. Missionary great-grandparents, my grandmother was born and raised in China. That same

grandmother ultimately became a teacher, as did her daughter, my mother. Several cousins chose the education field as well. So, I wanted to tread the untrodden path and do neither of those things.

My relationship with God may seem a bit unusual. Since young childhood, I haven’t been a regular church attendee. In my middle childhood, my mother and I usually went only occasionally when visiting my grandfather. In high school, she was hired as a Director of Christian Education, but I only went sporadically. As a young adult, I asked all the pretentious questions about God’s existence, and tried to find proof in random churches here and there, usually to little avail. In adulthood, of course, I found a church I loved (this one!), but moved away over seven years ago, and didn’t find another that even remotely compared in the interim. Fortunately, you all have continued to hold and embrace me figuratively throughout the ups and downs of those years.

Meanwhile, 20-something me chose broadcasting as a career, specifically radio. Upon graduation, I hurriedly got

... Janine Zabriskie


married, then went from big-city Chicago to an eye-opening fourteen months in a New England hamlet, doing a morning talk show from a station with barely enough wattage or budget to carry our voices beyond the large closet we broadcasted from. I learned a lot, however, and during the 1992 Presidential campaign season, met several notable people including Pat Buchanan, Ralph Nader, and Bill Clinton. My radio career turned out to be fairly short, however, and less than legendary. I realized this really wasn't my dream after all.

I returned to Chicago, changed jobs to become a surgery scheduler, got a divorce, changed locations with a move to Austin, and big or small, the changes just kept coming. I worked at a children's hospital for the first time, and discovered the field of Child Life. I started attending Central Presbyterian Church, went to Sunday school classes, joined a committee. I applied to UT for a master's program in education, and began a new career journey. When explaining Child Life to people, I described it as "my minister father, my teacher mother, my interest in social work and my decade of experience in hospitals, all rolled into one." I became ordained as an elder at CPC. My social circle expanded as the seminarians came and went – I cheered them through Hebrew and Greek, and went out for pizza when we all needed a study break. And then, my master's work was completed, I was officially Janine Zabriskie, M.Ed., and it was time to leave Texas.

After another brief stint in Chicago for a required internship, I went to work at the children's hospital in Columbus, Ohio. The role of a Child Life Specialist – giving children ways to explore, understand and process events happening both within them and around them during hospitalization – was extraordinarily fulfilling. A hospitalized child's response to presence is immediate. They trust you. When you explain what's going to happen and what to expect, they believe you. When you reassure them you'll be right there to help them, it is like having forged a covenant with that child. Simple things matter. Promises must be kept.

In March of 2012 my life took its harshest and most unexpected turn in the form of a Stage IV cancer diagnosis. The child life specialist underwent hospitalization herself for the first time. Testing, surgery, chemotherapy, and more testing. Every day has been an adjustment to a new life, a new body, one that may or may not respond in a way that I expect, let alone in a way that I like. Perspectives shift. Priorities change. My prayers are more earnest, but also more about others instead of myself. God has seen me

through all of it, and perhaps even directed my life around it. Cancer makes you think about mortality, but you come away realizing you don't really know if you're any closer to it.

In the meantime, I have a life to be lived. I love working with children, and helping families to be stronger together. I have learned that death can be frightening, but fear is lessened when there is compassion and acceptance instead of a sustained struggle to ward off the inevitable. And so, here I am, back in Austin, attending seminary. My vision for myself still includes hospitals, as I believe my child life expertise could well support a role in hospital chaplaincy. Perhaps my experience with cancer will direct me more toward pediatric hospice care. But now, I believe that even becoming a pastor, if that is God's vision, would be something I can make completely my own. And we must always move toward God's vision for our lives. 



“I am one of the sojourners.”

Kent Miller

“So, let me start my story at the beginning....” One day while listening to new church members struggle to tell their story as they join the church, the starting place for my story and theirs became clear to me. Since then I always start “at the beginning” with the ancient account of how my journey is part of that great Judeo-Christian, human journey into the heart of God.

Deuteronomy 26:10-14, The Message
*A wandering Aramean was my father,
 he went down to Egypt and sojourned there...,
 The Egyptians abused and battered us...
 And God took us out of Egypt...
 gave us this land flowing with milk and honey.*

I am one of the sojourners. As a youth when I confirmed the parental vows made at my baptism, this ancient story became the beginning of my story as I joined others on the great trek—Abraham, Moses, Odysseus, Jesus, Paul, Buddha, Mohammed, the Prodigal Son and many others

—going out, experiencing great difficulty, and finding the way home. And of course, home is the discovery of “soul” and the eternal presence of the divine with us. Jesus calls it the treasure in the field. Poet/priest Gerald Manly Hopkins calls it “the immortal diamond.”

After spending two summers during college as a counselor in a camp for inner city children, I realized God was leading me into full time ministry. My life’s service has been varied—sociology professor, director of an inner city mission organization (“hustler”), author and teacher of health ministry working for Benedictine nuns, builder of non-profit organizations, fund raiser, youth minister, church pastor.

That’s it. I was led or thrust out. I had good fortune along the way, struggled some, wandered into dead ends, was drawn back onto the road, and now find myself living in the glow of his “land of milk and honey”. Gratitude is the response for none of it is of my doing. It is grace all the way.

Now, two stories about my journey. Occasionally I have glanced backward and discovered along my path the “snake skins” I have shed as my faith has grown. Like the

... Kent Miller

shed skins that allowed the snake to grow, I (painfully) shed those articles that stunted growth. I have become less interested in “what I believe”, and more interested in what I am growing into.

“So, what are the skins you have shed?” you ask. I am a follower of Jesus Christ. But, I shed the “tribal god” skin that says my God is the only (true) God— certainly not the same God worshipped by Muslims, or Hindus, or Buddhists, or any other group. This is often expressed as “Jesus is the only way.” Years ago I found “the god of our tribe” is a terribly confining skin that led me into many religious battles, and also political battles with folks attempting to enact laws based on their tribal gods. So, I am not interested in religious talk about the battles of our “tribal gods”, but more interested in sharing experiences about the One God of us all, manifest in many ways to many people, who hears the prayers of all, and calls everyone to be a sojourner on the path to the immortal diamond.

A second skin I have shed is a “literal” reading of scripture. Instead, I read it metaphorically. Most of our Bible is poetry, song, story, parable, preaching, teaching, even laws and liturgy (which we certainly do not take literally). Scripture points to “the Word of God made flesh in Jesus Christ.” Scripture is designed to touch our imagination, our heart. Shedding this skin allowed me to grow into an appreciation of visual arts and all forms of esthetics as windows to my soul. Reason and intellect were no longer the only vehicles for faith (so Presbyterian!). Art in worship became very important to me.

These two changes result in the fact that I realize God is a mystery of which we really can’t say much at all, but only can be open to experience the holy in the moment. I have become very suspect of people who tell me what God says, or who God is. At most, I can speak about my (our) experience of God, but that is not God. For me, silence and awe before the Mystery is the only appropriate response to God. Words fail the reality. I really like the little “One Minute Wisdom” story of Jesuit priest Anthony de Mello,

“The disciple came to the master and said, ‘Master, will these practices you are teaching me bring me enlightenment?’

“No more than they will cause the sun to rise” the Master said.

“Then why are you teaching them to me?” the disciple asked.

“So you will be awake when the sun rises.”

My second story occurred when I was 52 years old. I went into a spiritual desert—a “mini-pause” when the first half of life is abandoned to enter the second half of life. My job with the Benedictine community ended and I took three months to “find myself” in reassessment of God’s call. It was both the most intense inner experience of my life and the most fruitful time of my life. I attended a week-long spiritual retreat. I started seeing a spiritual counselor or guide. She was helpful in guiding me into my inner life. And I saw the movie “The Fisher King” starring Robin Williams— five times! It is the story of Parsifal and the search for the Holy Grail. That was my search—to find the symbol and experience of healing and wholeness that it represents. The intellectual rigor and esthetic path combined to lead me in a year-long discovery of depth, grounding, and service. Both my unconscious and my imagination were unlocked and God met and led me in new ways. I recommend the desert.

So, there it is--a journey of change for another wandering sojourner who struggles to stay faithful on the journey out and the return home. ♪



“So here I am, accepted as I am at church, just like when I was a boy.”

Matthew Beckett

I do not remember a time when I did not believe in God. Of course, I do not remember much of my early childhood because when I was eight years old I got hit by a car and spent several months in the hospital, the first part in a coma. And that, really, is where the story of my faith journey begins.

The first night I was in the hospital after getting hit the Senior Pastor of our church in Salt Lake City (yes, there are Presbyterians in Salt Lake City) came and sat with my parents the whole night, which of course when I learned of it later gave me a good feeling about God and people who work in the pastoral field. At first, my parents' prayers, I have been told, were of 'just let him live, that's all we care about' variety. But later, once it became clear that I would live, they started realizing that they did want a bit more than just that.

Obviously, I did do more than just live, and from the time I left the hospital, church was always a big part of my life. I was accepted for who and what and where I was at church, no questions asked, which was not always the case

at school, when I went back. A boy in a wheelchair or a walker or who just moves a little differently gets plenty of teasing from "normal" kids, and at school there was a fair amount of this. But at church there was never any of this. In Sunday school, worship service, the children's choir when I later joined it, and what was then known as 'The Kids' Club', everyone treated me like everyone else, except of course that sometimes I needed, and received, a little help getting around. For all of these reasons, my parents never had to force me to go to Sunday school and church. In fact there were a few times when they would have liked to sleep in but I wouldn't skip it.

When I got to Junior High and then Senior High none of this changed, since I still felt most accepted for who I was at church. I had friends in school and in Boy Scouts, some very good friends, but church was still a special place, where no one acted like I was any different even though I did still have some 'limitations' as I prefer to call them. Plus one of my best friends from scouts also went to my church, at least some of the time. I enjoyed going on summer mission

... Matthew Beckett

trips and camps throughout both my Junior and Senior High youth group days. When we returned from the trip the summer after my senior year was a very sad time for me, since my time in the youth group was then over. I was one of the very few seniors at our church that kept coming to every activity I could even that last whole year. There wasn't any kind of college group at our church, so the next year I went to Sunday school and worship service and that was it. The summer after my freshman year of college, my family moved to Texas but I decided to finish school in Salt Lake. Since my head injury made it impossible for me to drive, getting to Church became more complicated, not that I did not still have the desire to go. After my early life experiences, I never had a period of drifting away that many people do at that age. We had family friends that offered me a ride most Sundays, and when I did not oversleep after studying late into Saturday night, I went with them, but this did not always work out.

Towards the end of my college experience, I came to understand myself as a homosexual, and knowing The PCUSA'S official position on this back in 1998, I was not sure there was a place for me in the Presbyterian Church. The church my parents and I attended in Arlington, where we lived between Salt Lake and Austin, was a much more decentralized denomination, and our specific congregation was one of the more open-minded ones. When we came to Austin and first visited Central and I saw the motto, my first thought was that this might just mean racially and not extend to homosexuals, but of course I found that I was wrong.

So here I am, accepted as I am at church, just like when I was a boy. I do not know if I have many miles left to travel or if my journey is nearly at an end. None of us do, of course, but this I do know - my life journey so far would have been much harder without my faith journey running parallel to it. And while I do not know the storms and trials that may yet lie ahead, I know that God will be with me through all of them, just as He has always been. 