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Central Journal

Stories of Central Presbyterian Church

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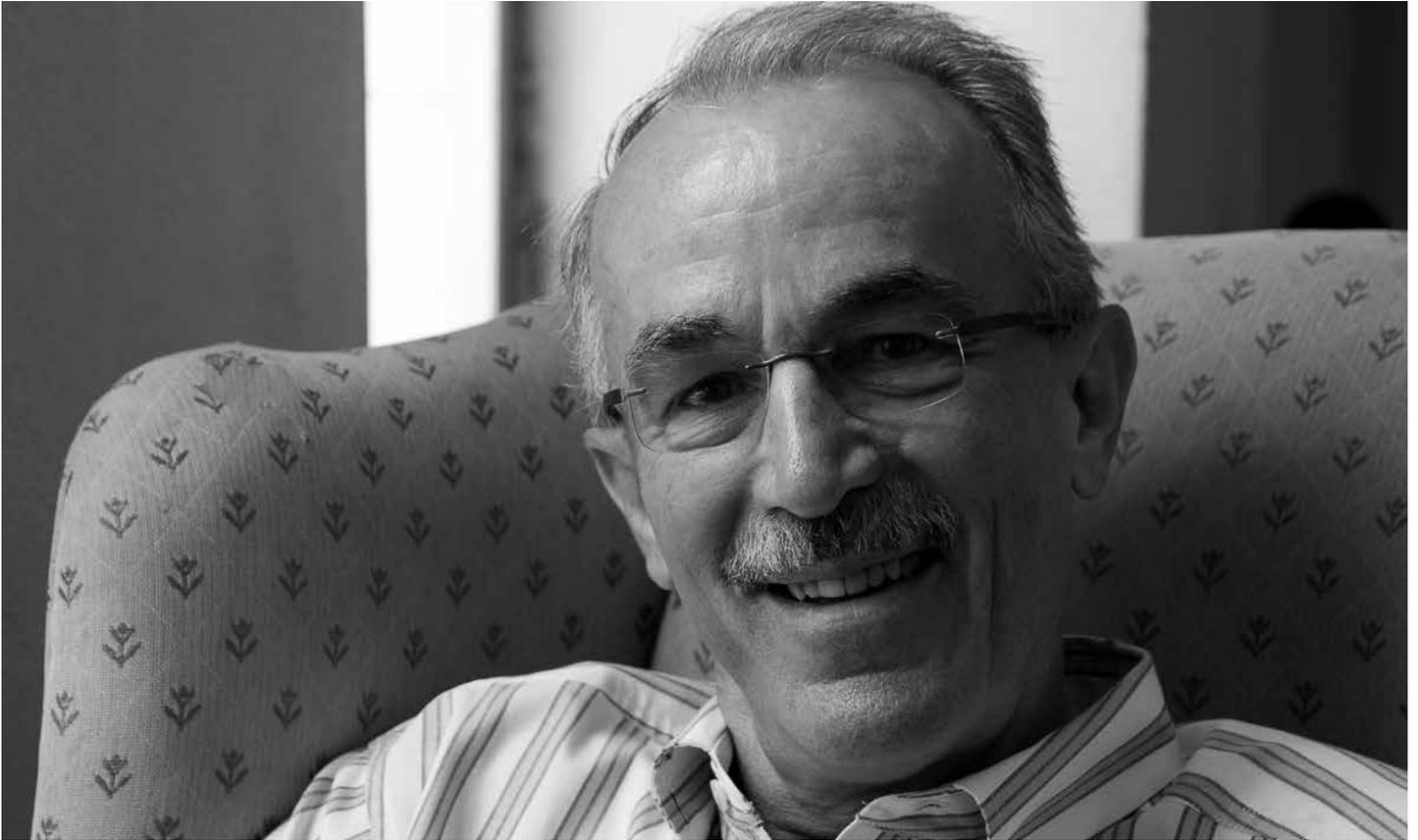
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“My old life was dead and I was reborn.”

Dan Chamberlain

In reflecting on my journey I recall the words of the 23rd psalm, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: For thou art with me, Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.” This psalm was mere words when I was born to loving parents in Keene, New Hampshire. My father was a minister, my mother the first woman graduate of McCormick Theological Seminary. Childhood with four brothers and a sister was unremarkable. We were, by all accounts, a typical family active in church and community. Although a belief in God was part of my genetic predisposition, I had no faith, nor did I have a relationship with my creator. My faith was in my family.

My family dynamic changed tremendously in my teenage years. My attraction to the opposite sex increased and I became self-conscious about others’ perceptions of me and my family. I hungered to fit in somewhere and started to prefer the company at the local pool hall over church potluck dinners. Smoking cigarettes was cool as was drinking alcohol. God was a distant thought. In 1969, our family left New England, my Dad resigned from the ministry and our family joined a religious order based in the ghettos of Chicago’s east side.

Life in a religious order was unusual. The order’s philosophy was to separate teenagers from their parents, and assign each to separate religious houses where married couples would have their own bedrooms, but singles often roomed together. My guardian parents were nice, but there was no parental supervision. During high school, I lived in houses in Boston, Denver and Houston. Life in the order was very structured. Summers were spent at youth camp, or at Ecumenical Institute HQ in Chicago.

These years brought many new experiences; some strengthened my faith while others had the opposite effect. During an illness in the last semester of my senior year, I recall lying in my hospital bed recovering from surgery feeling very alone and totally abandoned by my faith community. The order community where I’d lived for two years and the order hierarchy limited parental visits to one each over my three month hospital stay. No one from my religious house called, wrote or visited. My nurses were a life-saving force. Although I’d started to rebel from order structures prior to my illness, the lack of love and caring from the people with whom I’d lived caused me to lose all faith in God and religion.

My family left the order the summer of 1973 to resettle in upstate

... Dan Chamberlain

New York. My focus was on weight gain as I struggled with my loss (70%) of digestive capacity. Moving to Houston in 1974 I found work in the grocery business, met my first wife, married and graduated from the University of Houston to start a career in technical sales. Hard work and long hours brought success, but there was trouble brewing in my home life. Fueled by my growing affection for alcohol, my marriage ended in divorce. My faith in hard work and self-reliance failed me. King alcohol was having its way.

Alcoholics Anonymous renewed my hope and faith that God was alive and well in the world. Although I wasn't a one-meeting wonder, I finally got the program after years of misery, pain and a brief visit to Hillsboro County Jail on Good Friday 1989. When I really needed God, and became willing to seek him, I was able to accept the program of AA, do the work and enjoy a spiritual experience that resulted in sobriety and an ever deepening relationship with God. Recovering from a hopeless state of mind and body has allowed me to experience God's grace. There's no way to express feeling how God's love ... "anointed my head with oil; my cup does runneth over." My old life was dead and I was reborn in the spirit of sobriety. Central Presbyterian Church played a role in that new life and renewed my faith in the church.

Central was attractive because of its downtown location. After my first visit, I returned time and time again. Maybe it was the cross calling, maybe the music, the ministries, the preaching or the people. After meeting my amazing wife Carrie, we were married at Central, and soon were serving as deacons, then as elders. My elder experience had me chairing the CPC Facilities Team. The years on the session were demanding and rewarding. The old beautiful rustic CPC building requires a lot of love, and facilitating that TLC allowed me to work closely with lots of people. Doing so deepened my love for the people and the mission of Central Presbyterian Church.

I'm not sure where my faith journey will take me next, or where I might be called to serve God, but for now I'm content to respond to the call in the rooms of AA and with the wonderfully diverse faith community at the corner of 8th and Brazos. ♪



“How blessed I am to have a faith family who walk with me along this rocky road of discovery.”

Alice Day

Interesting how our outer lives and inner lives intersect. My spiritual journey for the last ten years has been closely tied to the unexpected entry of four grandchildren into my daily life. These have been times of struggling to discern the right thing to do and accepting and embracing a life in my retirement years that is much different from what I had planned. When the children, ages 6-12, came to live with me in June 2005, my intention was to provide temporary care until other arrangements could be made. Friends, family, and I had agreed that it was not in anyone’s best interest for me to try to take the children permanently: I was too old, the children were too needy, they belonged in two-parent homes, my house wasn’t big enough, I didn’t have enough resources as a retired state employee....Yet as the months went by, I struggled with the reality of what was ahead for the children—perhaps foster care for some, adoption for others, with the very real possibility that they would lose touch with each other and with me. Our decision to become a forever family and our adjustment to a new life together have been guided by certain touchstones, which I can only attribute to the work of the Spirit in our lives.

Our church family played a critical role in our lives during

those first difficult months and in the years to follow. From the first day I showed up at Central Presbyterian Church with this rag-tag group of children, the church family embraced them with unconditional love. There were times when the children’s odd behavior reflected the effects of trauma and abandonment and when they suffered bullying at school, but they have always found complete acceptance at church. Many church friends regularly greet them by name and follow their interests. CPC provides spiritual guidance and rich experiences in an atmosphere of love and offers ways for the children to build confidence through leadership roles. From this congregation and a few of my closest friends have come mentors and supporters for the children in forms too many to mention. It is difficult to overstate how important this tangible connection to the love of God has been, for the children and for me.

The children themselves provide regular touchstones to guide me. Not only their neediness, but their gifts of courage and resilience have pushed me beyond what I thought were my limits. One particular moment stands out in my mind, a time when, at least consciously, I still planned to return the children to the custody of the state. On our first Christmas season together,

... Alice Day

I was suffering from exhaustion and a severe case of the flu. Nevertheless, we managed to put up a tree and I cautioned the children to enjoy looking at the presents but not to handle or shake them. One morning I came into the living room and found eight-year-old Kevin sneaking among the presents. When I confronted him, he grinned shyly and stepped out. I could see he had placed some crudely wrapped presents under the tree. “I made them for you,” he said softly. I cried for three days. As my tears subsided I felt a certain clarity about the way the Spirit had been transforming our relationships. I shared with the children my belief that in our home God was creating a new family and calling each of us to be part of it. We began 2006 focused on that goal.

A special touchstone for me has been the loving partnership with my daughter Amy, a force of nature with whom I share not only tears but lots of laughs in dealing with the antics of four children. As I began to accept a calling to a new life with the children, Amy felt a similar call. I was reluctant to consent to her leaving a successful professional and personal life in Houston to come to Austin and participate in child rearing. Finally, after months of our debating, she said to me flatly, “Mother, this is what I need to do, and you just need to let me do it.” By that time I had recognized the futility of ignoring a call. Amy moved to Austin.

In subsequent years I have been learning to adjust to circumstances in my life that are often out of sync with my age. I have been inspired and instructed by many wonderful people—some of whom I don’t even know personally, such as Catholic social innovator Jean Vanier. Vanier founded the L’Arche Federation, which now includes communities all over the world where people with mental disabilities and those who assist them share life together. One early morning I was listening to an NPR program on which Vanier was explaining how L’Arche transforms caregivers as much as those who are cared for. He talked about how working with the disabled was helping him, at age 79, discover what it means to be human:

And you see, the big thing for me is to love reality and not live in the imagination, not live in what could have been or what should have been or what can be...to love reality and then discover that

God is present.

It’s hard to explain why I was so moved by this interview, but I listened to it several times and it shifted my frame of reference the way a special encounter can sometimes do. Vanier was teaching me to embrace the richness and the challenges of this life rather than comparing it to my fantasy retirement years. Vanier said

when we learn to love reality, we discover that God is present there. I might say that as we embrace the life we’ve been given, we discover the center of our being. How blessed I am to have a faith family who walk with me along this rocky road of discovery. ♪



“I have learned... to trust that things will work out, even when they seem like they won’t.”

Laura Fry

Growing up I had a diverse exposure to church life. I attended Catholic school through most of my elementary experience, not because of any faith ties, but for the quality of education. In switching schools (as I seem to frequently do) I began to notice how differently people interpreted and practiced the same faith. As a family we moved around to different churches as well, when we attended. I suppose my mom was on her own faith journey at the time. The only steady presence of faith in my young life was my grandmother. Every time I would go visit her we went to her church, whether that was for service, or to stuff envelopes with the weekly newsletter. I have very fond memories of going to Jolly Pirates Donuts after services, and being doted on by all my grandmothers’ friends at church. Every summer I would spend a week with her to go to Vacation Bible School. At the time Jesus and faith had little to no meaning to me, but every time I visited my grandmothers’ church I felt very loved, by complete strangers.

As I got older I did not have much of a faith life, but always wished I did. With my family not regularly attending a

church I wasn’t sure what that looked like or how to make it happen for myself. Once I went off to college I had some opportunities to explore this. Having gone to a very liberal high school, religion was often stereotyped as we lumped all faiths together with the outspoken Bible thumpers. I finally realized the error in this way of thinking about the church when I went on a social justice trip with a college group to protest the School of the Americas. Church groups were very present there, and nuns were hopping the fence and getting arrested in full habits. This changed my concept of what it meant to practice your faith. The next year I got a job working in the nursery of the Presbyterian Church near campus. It was a wonderful place, where once again I felt that love from strangers. I never attended a service, as I was always in the nursery, but I built bonds with families that went there and knew these were good people whose faith I admired.

When I moved to Austin and began teaching I often found myself in a very negative, depressing environment. I knew I needed something positive in my life, so I decided to

... Laura Fry

try out the Church. At the time this had nothing to do with faith or God, it was about looking for a community filled with love. Having had such a positive experience working at a Presbyterian church in Lexington, I began my search there. This led me to Central. The first day I visited there were bagpipers playing in the courtyard and people reached out to get to know me. I quickly realized this was a very positive place, a place where complete strangers showed me love. I have been here for about six years now, and have slowly been learning what it means to have faith in my life. In my time at Central I have learned to pray, and trust that things will work out, even when they seem like they won't. Central has supported and challenged me in my faith journey that is far from over. I have served as a Deacon, attended and led Sunday school classes, served on committees, joined a book club, and most importantly, learned how to give back to strangers that love that I value so much. ♡

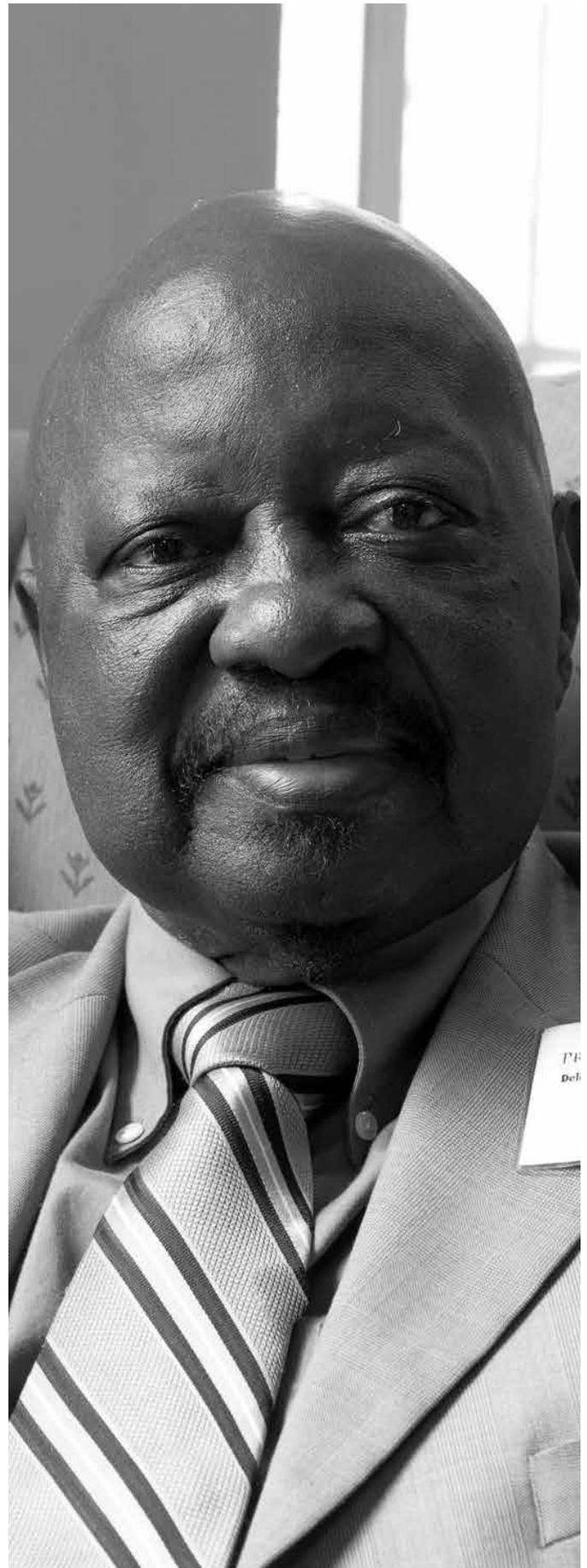
“I am happy and proud to be a member of our wonderful church.”

Judson Greene

I was born in Liberia, a small country on the West Coast of Africa where I was blessed with loving and caring parents who spent all their time and energy ensuring that their four children grew up in a safe and Christian environment. Issues of safety, child care, health and basic family economic matters were daily concerns of our parents for our survival during our early childhood and adolescent years. They certainly did a very wonderful job because we survived all difficulties and I along with all my siblings (two older brothers and one younger sister) were able to complete high school in Liberia and obtain higher education degrees here in the United States and in Europe.

Our family was part of one big communal group in a mainly agrarian society where the land and rivers were the predominant source of food for everyone.

Early childhood education was the responsibility of our mother at home until missionary schools became available by various denominations. Later, the government established elementary and high schools in most communities around the country.



... Judson Greene

My high school education was at an Episcopal mission school that was established in Liberia by the Episcopal Diocese of Virginia. My parents were assisted financially by grants from the school. All students earned additional income by working each afternoon in various sections of the institution including laundry room, dining hall and kitchen, and general maintenance work.

At that school, I had the opportunity to grow in faith and study religious education classes that gave me a good historical and philosophical understanding of Christianity. We attended morning and evening services daily, and on Sundays there were Sunday School classes held in the afternoon. I became active and engrossed in our daily worship services and served as an acolyte. Later in my senior year, I assisted the priest in conducting all evening services.

After graduation, I entered the University of Liberia where I remained for four years. It was during this time that I joined the Presbyterian Church where my parents had always been members, and my father was a Ruling Elder for several years. Our home church was a small building with a small membership, but yet God was with us and that Church family was wonderful!

Upon getting married, my wife and I continued as members of the Presbyterian Church mainly worshipping at the First Presbyterian Church in Monrovia, Liberia. Our children were all baptized here at Central because we were compelled to leave Liberia due to some political problems that occurred there in 1980. I am happy we found Central and I am happy and proud to be a member of our wonderful church. ♪

“I have found a group of people—a chosen family.”

Peggy Terry

My faith journey began when I entered first grade.

My father had been asked to return to teach at Southern University in Baton Rouge, La. He left Southern after one year to teach at Texas College in Tyler, Texas. During the interim his family grew to include my brother and me. My parents accepted the invitation to return without seeking input from me (I was going on 6) or my brother (who was going on 5).

The new Southern University Laboratory School building (which would house grades 1 – 12) was scheduled to open that fall. Automatic enrollment in the Lab School was not part of the benefit package. Enrollment consisted of an interview – with the formidable Mrs. McLeod. Mrs. McLeod was the first grade teacher. She had the final (and only) approval for who would be in her class. I remember going to her home, but not much about the interview itself. Later I would learn that on the first day of school I was listed only as Mr. Terry’s daughter.

It was an exciting time. New home. New school. A chance to make friends with 34 other 5 and 6 year olds. At



... Peggy Terry

the time 35 students in a first grade class was considered the norm. Mrs. McLeod could handle that size group, with the help of 3 student teachers. As my mother would later say – they don't make teachers like Mrs. McLeod anymore.

My brother would follow the next year in Mrs. McLeod's class. He was one of 39. Some might say that his admission was a legacy.

During one of the early parent teacher conferences, Mrs. McLeod asked my mother if we had found a church home. Both of my parents received their early education in parochial school systems. But both had been raised Baptist. So we were visiting around among the Baptist churches. Mom said no we hadn't found a church home. Mrs. McLeod suggested a little Presbyterian church. My mother was terrified of Mrs. McLeod (her words, not mine). So off we went to the Presbyterian church.

Mrs. McLeod held considerable sway. I would later learn that many of my peers' parents had been taught by Mrs. McLeod.

A story that is still repeated about Mrs. McLeod's influence/intimidation involved the new principal Dr. McKelpin. Mrs. McLeod wanted to show her class (I had moved on by then) a bird's nest. There was a bird's nest in one of the pecan trees on the playground. I am sure many of the older students would have jumped at the opportunity to launch a stick (or perhaps a board) into the tree to knock down the nest (and probably some pecans depending on what time of year it was). Rather than deal with the exuberance (and not careful aim) of some older students, Mrs. McLeod tasked the principal – Dr. McKelpin – with climbing the tree to get the nest. The students loved the nest.

We found a home at the First Presbyterian Church of Scotlandville. 3 (later 4) of my classmates and their families were members. My fourth grade teacher was a member. The Lab School's music teacher (who taught music for all 12 grades) was a member. Later, when my father decided that teaching me to drive was not really in his job description, Mr. Hildreth (who was married to the sister of the 4th grade teacher Mrs. Perkins) volunteered one of his student teachers for the assignment.

First Presbyterian Church of Scotlandville was organized in 1922 by the Rev. John W. Rice. In 1944, Rev. Rice was called to a church in Alabama. Today most know of Rev. Rice through his granddaughter – Condi.

Rev. James, the pastor for First Presbyterian Church of Scotlandville, encouraged the youth to be involved in many of the denomination's youth activities. Through these encounters I had a chance to meet Rev. Arch Tolbert of

University Presbyterian Church. Later, when I enrolled at LSU, I knew I could always drop by University Pres., if I stayed on campus for the weekend.

After graduation I moved to Texas. Wherever I was living I would seek out and visit the Presbyterian church. When I moved to Austin I visited Central (then First Southern). I found a familiar face – Bertina Hildreth. Bertina was a few years behind me at the Lab School. But we knew each other through church, her parents lived two streets over from my parents, her aunt had been my 4th grade teacher and her father had "volunteered" one of his students to teach me to drive.

During one of my weekly phone conversations with my parents, both noted that the Hildreths had said that Bertina mentioned that she hadn't seen me in church for awhile. I can take a hint. I was soon attending more regularly.

With more frequent attendance I found a new church home. My faith journey continued as my involvement with Central expanded. CPC was patient and supportive as I dealt with St. Ed's MBA program. With the deaths of biological family members (father, uncles, aunts and two cousins), this chosen family nurtured me through the storms. CPC has been a source of stability during uncertain times – after 9/11, during floods and ice storms, after the Boston Marathon massacre. This family has also become LSU fans not only for the championship games, but whenever LSU played A&M. In addition to being a source of support, Central has provided me with many opportunities including serving as an Elder (including Clerk of Session), a Deacon, Liturgist and Usher. I have also had the chance to watch the process of calling a new pastor. For some it may be an anguishing time. Yet I know that it is part of God's plan.

The journey that began with Mrs. McLeod is continuing. Like a Soul Train line, I have found a group of people – a chosen family – that is cheering me on and preparing me for whatever is next. ♪