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Central Journal

Stories of Central Presbyterian Church

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“I try hard to keep a Mary heart in a Martha world.”

Jane Dunham

When I was growing up, my parents took my sister and me to a community church for a while, because that is “what you do.” When we moved to the countryside outside New York City, they stopped attending church themselves, but dropped us off at a Methodist Church Sunday School in the next town. My mother was nominally Episcopalian and my father was still in rebellion from an overly enthusiastic Methodist mother. They did not practice a religion in our home.

When she was old enough, my sister became part of an Episcopal Church, and took me along with her to their youth group. I was still looking for a church home at that point, and accepted an invitation to visit a Presbyterian church in the same town. I soon felt that I was meant to be a Presbyterian, and I continued this connection by joining the Presbyterian student group at college. When I started dating Cleon, we gravitated naturally to the Presbyterian church in town, and we chose to be married in the church back home where I had discovered Presbyterianism.

The second week of our marriage, we stayed with distant cousins of Cleon’s in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. There I was

immersed immediately in their outreach to international students. Their house had signs on it in several languages, saying “Little United Nations.” When students came to New Orleans, where we settled down, our cousins would call us and ask if we could help them out. I soon had a calling and, eventually, a profession.

In the 51 years since we were married, Cleon and I have hosted over 1150 international students in our home. Some of them lived with us, some became long-term friends, and some just had a meal or two with us. We hosted 14 year-long high school exchange students and had many college students with special needs (usually financial, emotional or medical) live with us. I became an international student advisor at four Texas universities, which gave me easy access to international students who wanted to be friends or had special needs. They have enriched our lives tremendously, and we still get asked to their weddings and graduations and now attend those of their children. We have been treated as special guests at these occasions, many of which were held in other countries. I quip that I will go to any country for a wedding. But we also travel just to

... Jane Dunham

visit the people who have meant a lot to us. And many of them come back to see us and stay with us again.

We were very active in an English-speaking church in The Hague during our four years living in Europe. When we came back, I knew the incredible diversity we had experienced there (over 20 denominations, from about 50 different countries) would be impossible to find in the U.S. I wanted to worship with people who didn't look like me. I felt instantly at home when I worshipped the first Sunday at Central. Although the congregation wasn't as international as the church we had left, the diversity of the congregation showed up in many other ways.

I am still working with internationals, primarily through a program I lead, International Coffee Mornings, that meets weekly at University Presbyterian Church. I also coordinate host families for Fulbright students who come to Austin for an enrichment program. My outreach to internationals is in secular settings, but the undergirding of my calling is my firm belief in offering hospitality to sojourners and my experience in the healing grace that comes over me when I offer a hand to someone who needs an American friend. I receive so much more from these people than I give them.

The spirit of the people at Central continually reinforces my belief that we are all members of the same body of Christ, and we are all worthy regardless of our current circumstances.

I try hard to keep a Mary heart in a Martha world, forgetting the small things and concentrating on the people we host. In Luke 10: 38-42, we learn that Mary sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. Martha was distracted by her many tasks and fretted that Mary was leaving her to do all the work. The Lord told Martha that *"Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."* It is hard, sometimes, because that bathroom sink really is dirty. And 45 internationals are waiting for hamburgers at a July 4th picnic in our backyard.

Throughout the New Testament, we are encouraged to offer hospitality to others. Ephesians 2:19-22 -- *"So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God."*

Hebrews 13:1-2 -- *"Keep on loving each other as brothers. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it."*

There are many angels in our lives. ♪



“Love Wins. Again, and again, and again.”

Chris Kennedy

When I was asked to write for the CPC Faith Journal, I immediately responded to Barbara Miller that I would be happy to do so. I then started thinking “what the heck am I going to write about?” When I think about my faith journey, it seems relatively un-dramatic. No major moments of discovery, no major tests of faith, etc. But, as I talked about it with my wife Lisa, I realized that my faith story is both conventional and, maybe, unconventional in many ways. Probably similar to the experience that a lot of you have gone through.

I was raised in a pretty typical upper-middle class family. I was raised Catholic, and we attended mass regularly. I’m a south Texas boy, so my Catholic experience was definitely influenced by my surroundings. I was always drawn to the spiritual and mystical side of the Mexican-American Catholic church. I loved the blending of faith, mysticism, and community from native traditions and the “old church.”

But, I was never steeped in the hardcore tenets of Catholic doctrine, never went to catechism classes, never was educated in Catholic schools, and was scolded by my high school physics teacher (a dyed-in-the-wool Catholic) because I didn’t know

what transubstantiation was. All the really serious Catholics went to mass at the old church in Boerne where I grew up, while my family went to the poor little church in Leon Springs, where we had hippy guitar music, Cuco Flores played the role of Jesus in the Passion play on Palm Sunday, and beer was served at the parish festival.

When I was in college, I was still a faithful person and went to Mass occasionally with my family. But, I started to feel like the rules about what was accepted as “official” and recognized by the Church (read: has to be performed by Catholic clergy), as well as some of the exclusionary aspects of the Church, didn’t jive with my beliefs.

Lisa and I started attending University Presbyterian Church when we moved to Austin in 1991. Soon after we started attending, I met with one of the pastors at UPC, Juan Treviño (you may know his wife and daughter!) to discuss my questions about becoming a “non-Catholic”. Juan told me that he still felt Catholic, even though he was a Presbyterian pastor, and that there would always be Catholic in him.

For the next 17 years or so, my life and faith journey took

... Chris Kennedy

us to a couple of Presbyterian churches in Austin and in Richardson, and to a Methodist church in south Austin for about 5 years. This was a period where I lived life, focused on career, raised kids, and started to more seriously consider my faith. Most of the churches we attended were great places to learn more about scripture, to be in community with other people who had younger children, and to hear good solid sermons that helped me consider what I believed.

But, most of these churches seemed to be lacking something that was really important to me: building a connection between those of us in the sanctuary on Sunday mornings and the larger world. So Lisa and I set out to find a place that fulfilled that need, and that felt like a spiritual home. And we stumbled upon just such a place at 8th and Brazos.

I have felt that my time at CPC has, in many ways, been the most rewarding phase of my faith journey. I have learned more about my faith in the past 6 years than I thought I could at this stage in my life. What are some of those things?

- I learned that the best evangelism is shaking someone's hand, smiling, learning about them, and welcoming them into our midst.

- I have gained a better understanding of the intersection between Christianity and other faiths, and that much of my current belief system is not that far off from some Buddhist teachings (at least to the limited degree that I understand them). And I see that played out in the work our church does with refugees through iACT and Open Arms.

- I have learned the value of a good potluck, and I never pass up a pimento cheese sandwich in Smoot Hall.

- I have met folks living on the streets who have experienced things I can't imagine. I have become close friends with some of them, and I have seen countless others vanish from our community.

- I have had the joy of getting to know youth who come from all over the greater Austin area, and have grown to love that motley crew.

- I learned that a lot of people confuse me and Kevin Estes, including his daughter Perry.

- I have really fallen in love with the PCUSA's system of government, going so far as to download an electronic version of the Book of Order to my iPad.

- I learned that being part of a church community really gets deepest when you move past just Sunday morning worship. I grew more, met more people, and became more committed teaching Sunday school classes (including one about U2), volunteering at SXSW, serving on Session, and participating in ministry teams.

- Most importantly, I learned that Love Wins. Again, and again, and again. ♪



“God is love. God is truth. God is light.”

Judy King

I was born into a family with a Christian Scientist mother and Southern Baptist father, and as a child we never had a regular church life. One of my earliest memories though was reading the inscription on the wall of my grandmother’s Christian Science church: “God is love. God is truth. God is light.” I have always been grateful to have that image of God so early on. I liked going to church with friends and wished my family had a church tradition.

When I was in the 8th grade, we moved to Texas and started going to a Presbyterian church on a regular basis. My twin brother and I were baptized and joined the church along with our father. It was a wonderful feeling for me to feel officially a part of God’s family.

Throughout college and when I worked in Dallas after college, I continued going to worship services regularly, often to different Protestant denominations with friends. One summer I took instructions at a Catholic church out of curiosity. That came in handy when I married a Catholic who wanted to raise our three boys in the Catholic Church. I felt strongly that parents should give their children a faith background of some

sort, so Catholicism was fine with me.

I have learned through the years about different aspects of spirituality and various faith traditions - through reading, classes with a Catholic nun on a type of meditation, a study group with a yoga teacher, Sunday school classes, discussions in book clubs, and reading a Unity Church devotional called Daily Word. One of my favorite Unity teachings is to “behold the Christ” in people. Many aspects of Buddhism have been helpful to me, and I am fascinated by how much there is to learn about faith.

My first experience learning about the importance of a “church family” began at West Plano Presbyterian where I was a member for 20 years. The pastor and friends I made there were enormously helpful and supportive as I went through a divorce, learned a new way of life as a single person, remarried, and then lost my husband to leukemia. I really don’t know how I would have managed to keep going without their love and feeling God’s love surrounding me. It was then such a joy when Jerry came into my life, and we were married at West Plano.

I have also learned through the years how important and

... **Judy King**

rewarding participation in the work of a church can be, serving as an elder, deacon, children's Sunday school teacher, and in various other capacities. I love the wonderful music, insightful sermons, passing the peace and communion in our worship services and know that attending worship services regularly helps me stay grounded with all the ups and downs in life. I continue to find much support and love at Central, so thanks to all of you! ♡



"I learned... to trust that God's plan was so much better than my own."

Robin Manning

I am, as John Knox so eloquently stated, a "slave to Satan, and servant to sin" in need of grace. My selfish nature needs constant reminding that it is not about me, that I am not in charge, and that God's plan is so much better than mine. I am lucky to have had mentors and teachers that showed me by their example what it means to live life trusting God and serving others.

My dad's family were members of First Presbyterian Church in Houston since the 1890s. My mother was raised Methodist, but she joined the Presbyterian Church when she and Dad married. The church was, and still is, of utmost importance in my parents' life. Our family activities revolved around Sunday school, church services, circle meetings, and Bible study. My parents' closest friends were fellow church members. By the time I was in high school my closest friends were those I made at church. Even though we went to different schools all over Houston, we socialized on weekends and worshiped together every Sunday, listening to Dr. Jack Lancaster from our perch in the balcony. Our Sunday school teacher, David Hannah, was the most trusting, courageous, patient, and

loving man I ever met. He was a wealthy, important businessman who took the time every week for years to try and help teenagers figure out the answers to all their questions about life. His words and actions still influence me 45 years later.

In 1972, when ecology became a popular word, our youth group wrote a play about God's creation and man's destruction of it through pollution and waste. We sang and danced our way across the south to the Presbyterian Conference Center in Montreat, NC. At every stop we presented our play at host churches, then camped in their fellowship halls. The Youth Retreat at Montreat was the highlight of the trip - we performed before several hundred youth from across the country. I didn't realize it at the time, but our adult sponsors put in a lot more work than we did, organizing and planning so we could concentrate on performing. I now know what a gift it was to have adults support and guide us, and I want to be that adult for the students I teach.

During college at A&M and into my 20s I drifted away from church. My lifestyle didn't leave much room for thinking beyond the moment. My husband, whom I met our senior

... Robin Manning

year in high school, was raised by Baptists who rarely attended church. Robert liked to play hard on weekends, and neither of us felt the need to look for any deeper meaning to life. We moved around from College Station back to Houston, to Dallas, San Marcos, and then to Austin, and by the time we were 30 we had three kids under four years old. Then the economy tanked. Robert's grandfather in Monahans offered him a job, and we took it.

Small town living in conservative west Texas was a big change from Austin. I had a different last name than my husband, so people thought we weren't married. Our kids called us by our first names, which people thought was weird. But the lady across the street invited me to church anyway, and I will always be grateful she did. That little church restored my faith and I began to learn anew of God's goodness and love. The Reverends Jim Miles, Allan Guthrie, and Flynn Long became good friends and mentors to me over the next 20 years. They filled our pulpit when our pastors left for bigger and more prosperous places, served as liaisons from the presbytery when we searched for new pastors, and generally showed up when we were in need. I will always remember how Allan's sermons left me feeling convicted of my sins yet still loved by God, and how Flynn could miraculously and effortlessly weave all 3 lectionary passages together into a sermon that strengthened my knowledge of who God is and helped me understand my role in God's world. They were my spiritual guides as I grew to Christian adulthood.

Our time in Monahans brought many challenges. My husband's drinking led me to Al-Anon and a renewed knowledge that I was not in charge. Robert's sobriety in 1992 was a gift, and I learned again to trust that God's plan was so much better than my own. The church was my rock through bad and good times; I was a Sunday school teacher, youth leader, elected a deacon, then an elder, and served many years as Clerk of Session. I was on two Pastor Nominating Committees. It was a small congregation, so everybody pitched in. I even preached on occasion, when no one else was available.

But things change, and as the kids grew up and left for the big city we did, too. In 2005 I took a job teaching in Duncanville, a Dallas suburb. Robert worked as a parole officer in Waxahachie. I attended the local Presbyterian Church for the two years we lived there, but my faith and trust in God somehow dissipated. It wasn't a very cheery church, but I felt I needed to stay as so many people were deserting it. The bright spot was being a small group leader at Triennium, the Presbyterian youth gathering held every three years in Indiana. One of my roommates there, Vilmarie Cintrón-Olivieri,

has become a good friend. Her service to the church at the local and national level is another example of the kind of selfless giving that inspires me.

In 2007 we moved to Kyle when I was hired to teach geography at Hays High School. I visited a church closer to our home, but it just didn't "feel" right. One day we were driving through downtown Austin and I saw the sign "Deliberately Diverse and Fully Inclusive" outside Central. The next Sunday I made my way to 8th and Brazos and I was hooked. My faith in a Higher Power is being renewed, and I have found a measure of inner peace in the presence of such a loving and giving congregation.

I am so grateful for the great cloud of witnesses throughout my life who have shown me what it means to trust and serve the Lord. I am trying to do that, with the help and encouragement of the good people at Central. ♪



"I am grateful for the models of Christians as open, passionate, humorous people."

Will Slade

My faith journey has always been ambiguous and reflective. Doubt and inspiration, relationship and hope.

I'll admit to being conflicted about writing this faith journey. Since early childhood, I have always walked a line between Christian and Agnostic. When I describe the extent of my beliefs about Jesus and God, many people have responded, "So you're a Unitarian or a Quaker, right?" Perhaps I might be more aligned with the official doctrines of those churches than the Presbyterian one; however, this is my home, and I love being part of the broad spectrum that makes up the Presbyterian Church.

A high school retreat called Synod Youth Workshop was a moment of decision in how I was going to identify religiously. I was deeply troubled by a literal reading of John 14:6, that *"no one comes to the Father but through [Jesus]."* I couldn't accept a religion that condemned all of my friends of different faith traditions to Hell. I rejected that as a teenager, and I still reject it. But as a teen, this concern nearly caused me to reject Christianity altogether.

However, the leaders at that retreat emphasized another

important scripture: Ephesians 2:8: *"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God."* Faith is not a condition for grace; grace is freely given, and all of our good acts and faith are a response in gratitude to that generosity. This understanding of grace helped me embrace the Christian message, even while I maintain that other paths are valid for other people.

As an adult, I am inspired by profound, challenging sermons, immense acts of generosity and compassion, and moments of connection that I see and experience in this church. These tie me to the faith. Thanks to several saints at CPC, I've begun praying regularly, first for my wonderful prayer partner, and now for each of our youth.

Jesus' model of how to live is a standard none of us can live up to, but it provides a different set of goals than the competitive, materialistic notions that the world holds up for us. Mission trips with Trinity Presbyterian Church in Denton and with the CPC youth group have given me opportunities to pass on blessings and experience service. Working with immigrants and volunteering with Caritas and Central

... Will Slade

Mission have humbled and overwhelmed me with the injustice and insecurity in the world, and also the moments of profound connection and generosity that occur in those spaces.

Preachers, activists, musicians, cleaners, organizers, budgeters, and evangelists—the amazing variety of servants and leaders in this church inspire me. Their model has made me want to grow old in the church and keep it active and strong. I am grateful for the models of Christians as open, passionate, humorous people who want to bring god's heaven to our broken earth. ♡