

## *Spiritual Biography: Rob Sturdy*

Dear friends,

The following is my spiritual autobiography. It serves as both an outline of my walk with Jesus as well as my ministry. My hope is that the following gives you a better understanding of who I am, as well as who the Lord Jesus has been towards me and how he has used me and those around me to advance his Kingdom.

### *Growing up in a non-Christian Home*

I was born on April 26<sup>th</sup>, 1981, in Atlanta, GA. My family were not practicing Christians. We occasionally went to church at the prodding of our neighbors, who were committed Christians. Nevertheless, I found much of it boring. The church did not seem particularly interested in or attuned to the thinking and feelings of non-Christian people. I found being at church stressful, intimidating, and sometimes embarrassing.

We moved to the Mobile Bay area of the Gulf Coast of Alabama when I was ten years old. This is where my most formative years took place, and it remains the place I consider home. During this time, while many boys begin to pull away from parents, I drew closer to my father. He was my best friend. We would go to the movies together every weekend. We also bonded on the water, sailing in the bay or swimming in the Gulf. He remained my very best friend through my teenage years, when he was diagnosed with a malignant brain tumor. He would be dead within eighteen months of diagnosis. This was one month before my sixteenth birthday.

In many ways my father was the god of our family. He was the primary source of unconditional love, leadership, stability, and income. He was one of the finest, if not the finest man I have ever known. Which means the hole that was left in our family upon his death was profound. We were not members of a church, had no Christian friends, and had no faith of our own. We were poorly equipped in every way to deal with this tragedy, having no support structure to help us cope with and work through my father's death.

Two things happened during this time that left a permanent mark on what would later become my Christian faith. The first was the death of a young, elementary school aged boy. The school I attended in Alabama was Pre-K through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. The principal called me to his office one day to request that I go visit a 4<sup>th</sup> grade boy from our school who was dying of stomach cancer. I assume I was asked to do this because of my own intimate familiarity with cancer. I did go to the hospital, but I never met the boy. He was in a coma and remained so until he died. However, I did spend time with his mother and father. They were Christians and were sincerely grateful for my presence. When the boy died, I was asked to sit with the family at his funeral. The funeral was held at the same cemetery where my father was buried. After the funeral, the father of the boy asked where my father's grave was. I told him. He reached down into his own son's grave and removed a rose from his little boy's casket. Then he walked with me, hand in hand, and placed the rose on my father's grave. I wondered how it was possible, on his own day of

immense grief and devastation, that he could take the time to think of me. Later on, I learned the only possible way this man could have had a heart large enough to do such a thing was through his relationship with Jesus, but at the time, it was something I merely “pondered and treasured in my heart” (Luke 2.19).

The second thing that happened is I met a young woman named Stephanie, who would later become my wife. She was a Christian, though neither her own faith or the faith of her family was very visible, or pushy. It was quiet, steady, and sincere. Though many people encouraged her parents not to allow her to date me, because of my angry and violent reputation, they trusted their daughter and they trusted me. They welcomed me into their home many nights a week. They fed me and allowed me to be part of their family. They didn't welcome me into a church program, but *their own home*. They showed me the refuge that a Christian home can be to the outside, hurting world. Fear of sinners, and fear of association with sinners, prevents many Christians from exhibiting the grace that this family showed me. I'm grateful that God allowed me to witness such simple, genuine, Christian charity.

### *College and Conversion*

When it came time to go to college, I filled out an application to The Citadel. It was the only application I completed. I arrived in the Fall of 1999. At the time, Citadel cadets were required to fill out a “religious life survey.” The purpose of the survey was to help the Commandant's Department assign duties to cadets during the *cadre* period, a six-week book camp style training and indoctrination for freshmen. On Sundays, cadets were required to attend a meeting based off of how they filled out this survey. They were not permitted to leave campus until they had fulfilled this obligation. I was an atheist at the time, and therefore required to attend an ethics seminar. The problem is, the seminar did not meet until late in the afternoon, meaning I would be one of the last to leave campus. This was unacceptable, as Stephanie, my high school sweetheart, was downtown at The College of Charleston. I was determined to leave earlier. The only way to do this was to become a Christian, even if in name only. So that is what I did.

If I was going to swallow my integrity and attend a Christian service, I decided I would attend the very earliest one to meet and be one of the first, rather than one of the last, off campus. As it turns out, the earliest service at the time was offered by St. Alban's Anglican Chapel. It met at 0730 *off campus*! So, I became an Anglican. Because the school now believed I was a Christian, I was issued a serviceman's New International Version Bible. In the fall of 1999, there was no Netflix. We were not allowed to have phones. For the most part, we hid in our rooms from the upperclassmen. All of this led to an unbearable sense of boredom. To relieve the monotony, I read the New Testament.

Beginning with John's Gospel, one chapter a day, I made my progress. I found Jesus to be a captivating figure. Right away, I knew he was a man I should model my life after. Furthermore, I had a strange experience every time I opened the book of having his company alongside me. In an interview with a Dutch newspaper, Albert Einstein once remarked that “No one can read the Gospels without feeling the actual presence of Jesus. His personality pulsates in every word.” Having barely passed physics with a C-, this is one of the few similarities between myself and Einstein. Nevertheless, he and I do share this experience, and ever since I first read his words,

they have remained an apt description of my own experience reading through the Bible. I finished John's Gospel and read on through Acts of the Apostles. Then proceeded to Romans.

Romans was a difficult read. I didn't need to be convicted of my sin. I already knew I was a sinner. The difficulty of Romans came with the realization that because of my sin, I couldn't be Jesus's friend. Knowing Jesus, being his friend, had become the most important thing to me in the whole world. But Paul taught me in Romans that this was all a fantasy. I had disqualified myself from friendship with Jesus. So sometime that fall, I put the Bible away, determined that Christianity was not for me. I believed what I knew of it to be true. I believed God was real. I believed Jesus was his Son. I believed he had been crucified, had risen, and was alive. I also believed I was a sinner. I believed I would go to hell. I thought this was fair. I was neither upset about this, nor scared. What I *was upset* about, was that I would be in hell *without Jesus*. This was devastating news, as he had become the most important relationship in my life.

About a month after this, walking back to my room from biology class, I felt an urge to pick the Bible up one more time. It was a *tolle lege* moment. When I returned to my room, I opened my Bible to Romans ch. 3. It was there that I learned, despite my sin, God had found a way to be my friend. "Apart from the law" (Rom 3.21), meaning apart from my own misdeeds, God had found a way to make me right in his own eyes (Rom 3.24) by the free gift that is Jesus Christ. That remains the happiest day of my life, because it was the day I learned that all of the treasures I had found in Jesus reading through John's Gospel were still mine, not because of anything I had done, but what *he had done*, I could have peace with God and begin to learn how to live in peace with others.

### *Discerning the Call to Ministry*

I began to evangelize immediately, not in a purposeful or even conscious way, but as an overflow of joy and wonder at the Gospel of Jesus. By this time, St. Alban's had been blessed to have Doug Peterson as the chaplain. He and his wife Joanne are sincere, godly, joyful, loving Christians who are interested and supportive of young people. It was Doug who invited me and my best friend Iain Boyd to consider discerning a call to ministry. At the time, it was very unusual for men so young to go forward in the discernment process. But much to our surprise and delight, not only was Doug supportive, but so was Bishop Ed Salmon. Both of our calls were supported. Iain was sent to Nashotah House. I was sent to Wycliffe Hall, a permanent private hall which was, at the time, a member of Oxford University.

Putting myself forward for ministry is probably not something I would have done. If I had been asked, "are you called?", I may have said "no." Or, "I don't know." The plan for my own life was to marry Stephanie and become an English teacher. Perhaps I would train at Oxford or Cambridge, as Prof. James Rembert, a hero of mine, had. I'm grateful that Doug didn't put these questions of calling to me, but simply said, "I believe you two boys are called to the ministry." While an internal calling is surely important, my reading of the key New Testament texts such as Titus 1.5-9, 1 Tim 3.1-7, or 1 Pet 5.1-4, seem to place the burden on external calling. In other words, it is *the church* that recognizes that someone is above reproach (1 Tim 3.2), well thought of by outsiders (1 Tim 3.7), is self-controlled (Titus 1.8), gentle (1 Tim 3.3), doing the work of an evangelist (2 Tim 4.5), and able to teach and preach (Titus 1.9). These were things Iain and I

were already attempting to live into, without even thinking of ordination. Doug and others recognized this. Doug's invitation caused us to consider something we may not have considered, and his example has guided me to this day in actively looking for, recruiting, inviting, and training young people for the ordained ministry. Through these young people, God has blessed me with the opportunity to play a role, however small, in their lives. It is humbling and remains one of the deepest joys of my Christian life.

### *Oxford and Discovering a Call to Christian Scholarship*

It was at Oxford that I learned the value of scholarship in the life of a Christian, but not in the way you might suppose. I have a good mind and I'm a hard worker. That is not always a benefit to my relationship with Christ. It is actually very easy for me to forget the good news of the grace and mercy of Jesus as I rely on my own innate strengths instead of the easy yoke of Jesus Christ (Matt 11.29). That is a recipe for self-righteousness, which leads to failure, which leads to burnout, which leads to despair. Midway through my Oxford journey, relying on my natural giftings rather than the grace of Jesus had brought me to a point where my faith was in shambles. I felt like a fraud and a failure. I had considered resigning, running away, and at times even ending my life.

It was through an assignment for the University, a research paper on genocidal conflict and the role of the church, that I encountered Miroslav Volf's book *Exclusion and Embrace*. Through Volf's bibliography, I found my way to Bonhoeffer. Through Bonhoeffer, I found my way to Luther. Attempting to do nothing more than write a paper that would earn me a good mark, I came across this sentence from Luther's commentary on Galatians 3.13: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree." On this verse, Luther wrote:

All the prophets of old said that Christ should be the greatest transgressor, murderer, adulterer, thief, blasphemer that ever was or ever could be on earth. When He took the sins of the whole world upon Himself, Christ was no longer an innocent person. He was a sinner burdened with the sins of a Paul who was a blasphemer; burdened with the sins of a Peter who denied Christ; burdened with the sins of a David who committed adultery and murder, and gave the heathen occasion to laugh at the Lord. In short, Christ was charged with the sins of all men, that He should pay for them with His own blood. The curse struck Him. The Law found Him among sinners. He was not only in the company of sinners. He had gone so far as to invest Himself with the flesh and blood of sinners. So the law judged Him for a sinner.

Reading this, my heart leapt. It didn't leap necessarily because I understood what I had read. Rather, it leapt because it reminded me of something I once knew, which my reliance on my natural gifts had led me to forget. Reading this section of Luther's commentary, in the Radcliffe Camera at Oxford, reminded me of the Gospel. Luther also gave me words to find comfort in my own struggles. My lack of faith, my despair, my failures, and my sin, were not excluded from the work of Christ. Rather, the work of Christ had *dealt with my lack of faith, my despair, my failures and my sin*. Without knowing it at the time, discovering this sweet pastoral comfort and Gospel truth in the midst of serious theological study, at one of the finest universities in the

world, taught me there is an important place for scholarship in the life of the Christian. This experience gave me a passion for scholarship that I have not lost to this day.

### *Trinity, Myrtle Beach*

When Stephanie and I returned from Oxford, we were assigned to Trinity Church in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. I was hired as the curate. Much to our surprise, within a year, the rector had resigned his post. After a six-month interim, I was approached by the search committee to be the rector. Believing I was too young, and a poor fit for a church, I declined three times. Bishop Salmon invited me, my wife, and our brand new baby boy David, down to Charleston for a meeting. I had assumed that the purpose of this meeting was to direct us to a new associate's position somewhere else in the diocese. But that wasn't what was on Ed's mind. In a polite, gentle way, Ed called me a coward for refusing the invitation to serve as Rector. Before the lunch was over, he had effectively ordered me to take the position. That's what I did. That began six wonderful years with an amazing church family.

Things did not begin well. We bled members weekly. But, I had the support of my wise, unflappable wife. I had hired my best friend, Iain Boyd as my associate. And a number of sincere Christian people rallied round us. After a few missteps, either due to my own youthful stupidity, or real opposition to the Gospel, we broke through. Trinity experienced nothing less than a revival. Young families began to join the church. We grew 10% every year, five years in a row. The budget became balanced. We planted a new campus. We started a new, thriving college ministry at Coastal Carolina. We converted and baptized new Christians. It was an amazing time.

Perhaps the most amazing thing about that time, at least to me, was how a converted congregation could make such an enormous impact on the community. Myrtle Beach has the highest concentration of homeless and drug addicted in the state of South Carolina. Many of the churches have locked doors, to keep the homeless out. It was explained to me that a ministry was founded in Myrtle Beach, specifically to make sure the churches didn't have to deal with homeless people. But neither I, nor the congregation, who *had read the words of Jesus*, could lock our doors or pawn the homeless off on charities. The poor are sacred to God, and he so identifies with them that serving them is as if you were serving Jesus himself (Matt 10.42).

By God's grace, the doors of our church, and the doors of our hearts, were wide open to the castaways of our city. The good people of Trinity Church didn't view the homeless and drug addicted as projects, but as genuine brothers and sisters in Christ. They were our friends and family. They were in our homes. And we were in theirs, which meant the crack houses and sometimes even camps in the woods. Some of the homeless became members and even participated in ministries of the church. I will always be grateful to Trinity not just for loving me and my family, but also for loving the people Jesus loves, the down and outs, the cast aways, and the sinner.

During this time, Stephanie was under constant pressure to be "the Rector's wife." I thank God she was able to successfully resist this. My wife is her own woman. She is accomplished, having a research degree from Oxford University and was a paid researcher for the University in her own right. She is wise, much more so than me. She has a pastor's and counsellor's gifting. She

found ways to serve God quietly by seeking out and supporting young mothers. She became a counselor and friend to older women, some of whom were striving to salvage failing marriages. On more than one occasion, she welcomed the needy into our own home for extended stays because she *doesn't allegorize Matt 5.42*. Thank God! It was during our years at Trinity, through the birth of our two children David and Genevieve, as well her quiet, steady, obedient ministry that I saw hidden depths and unforeseen strengths in my wife. Like God's mercies, these are new every morning.

We left Trinity in 2012. I regret doing so. They remain a church family that taught me what unconditional love looks like in community, the value of covenantal friendship, the joys of receiving God's word as a people, the value of unpressured evangelism, and the joys of doing what Jesus said by actively reaching out to the least and lost. Leaving Trinity was enormously difficult. I had been offered a job at St. Andrew's in Mount Pleasant, which afforded me the opportunity to pursue many of God's callings on my life, such as preaching, theological education, and church planting. All things I believe are necessary for the future health and vitality of Anglicanism in North America.

### *St. Andrew's, Mount Pleasant and The Ridley Institute*

During my time at St. Andrew's, I was the primary preacher and teacher. Preaching is one of my main giftings. I used to read Paul's words in 1 Cor 9.16 as a threat: "Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" But I have come to understand these words as the words spoken by a man under compulsion akin to "Woe to me if I don't eat!" or "Woe to me if I don't breathe." I don't *need to be* ordained. I don't *need to be* up front. But I do *need to share the good news of Jesus*. And I'm always humbled and grateful to hear when this has been useful in the spiritual lives of others.

I spent my time establishing an accredited institute where Christians could receive robust theological education, as well as pursue fully accredited degrees. At its peak, we were training 200 lay people a semester with seminary level courses and fifteen lay people for accredited course work. We streamed our content on every livable continent, including secretly to a group of church planters in Pakistan. Concurrently with this work, we also hosted regular training for preachers, drawing sixty clergy in an ecumenical, annual gathering. I'm proud of this work, which allowed me to exercise gifts that I don't truly understand, but which relate to the training of leaders.

Recruiting, training, and mentoring clergy comes easily to me. I don't understand it. But I'm grateful that Jesus has allowed me to do this. I remember shortly before my departure I attended a service where Drew Miller was preaching. I had invested an enormous amount in Drew. We had become close friends in the process. As he was preaching and pulling insights out of Romans that were new to me, I remember being moved to tears that I was no longer Drew's mentor, but we were peers. Furthermore, I remember acknowledging that he *could be my pastor*, and I would be content. That Jesus would allow me to be part of the lives of people on their way into ministry, complete their training, feel no sense of competition or rivalry with them as they surpass me, and then sit at their feet as they lead me is one of my greatest joys in ministry.

I also spent time recruiting, training, and coaching church planters. This was a difficult task. On the one hand, I had to become a pastor and funeral chaplain to church plants that never should have been launched in the first place. The demands here were as a pastor to men who considered themselves failures (but weren't!) and guiding them to make the right decisions for themselves and their struggling congregations. This was also exhilarating, as I got to work with visionary, optimistic, faithful young men prepared to risk all for the Kingdom. To a degree we were successful, but we as an organization never put the time, effort, and money towards these endeavors we needed to make them successful.

### *St. Alban's Anglican Chapel at The Citadel*

In the midst of this work, sometime in the late spring of 2017, I received a phone call from Doug Peterson, my old chaplain at The Citadel. He asked if I would interview for the position of the Anglican Chaplain at The Citadel. I told him I had no interest. I was not particularly interested in working with young people. I had no desire to raise my own salary and operating expenses. Furthermore, my ego had a hard time adjusting to the idea of taking a job such as this. Nevertheless, Doug said it would be a personal favor to him, so I agreed.

The interview for St. Alban's was the first job interview I had been a part of since I was a teenager. I was nervous, but also surprised that during the interview, as I talked about the job, I could see myself doing it. After the interview was over, it dawned on me that I wanted this job, but I was nervous that the committee wouldn't want me. When Bishop Lawrence called, my heart was racing. I was certain he would tell me that though he was grateful I participated, I wasn't the right man for the job. But that's not what happened. He did offer me the job. I was overwhelmed, but still frightened.

Secretly, I was angry that I felt God calling me away from the work I had been doing. I prayed to God "Why are you making me go to St. Alban's? Why are you doing this!" Hearing God's audible voice is rare for me. But I did hear God's voice, audibly, on the day I prayed these angry, self-centered, pitiful prayers. God said, "Robert, I am going to The Citadel. You don't have to come. But I am going." I don't want this to sound as if this was easy. It wasn't. But hearing this put joy in my heart for the first time in a long time and gave me courage to go downtown to my alma mater.

Over the course of my ministry, I had taken to relying on my preaching gifts to see conversions happen in the household of God. At The Citadel, I preached the same as I always had. But there were no conversions, and the church did not grow. I was confused by this. At our first retreat in the fall, we took 40 cadets to Camp St. Christopher. A young man, who I will call "J", approached me late in the evening on Saturday night and asked to talk. He had one question. "If I become a Christian at this retreat, but then fall back into sin, will Jesus kick me out?" We read Romans ch. 5 together. It was through learning that the grace of Jesus is sufficient to cover the ever-rising tide of our own sin (Rom 5.20), that he decided to become a Christian that night. He was our first conversion. We baptized him that winter in the icy waters of a creek just outside of Greenville. Two young men assisted in that baptism. One was the young man that invited J to church, the other, was a non-Christian J had invited to church. J eventually led that young man to

Christ, and we baptized him the next fall. J has been following Jesus ever since and leads a growing Bible study with friends and classmates.

J was an important catalyst in a domino of conversions. We baptized 24 new Christians the following year, and 36 the year after that, but there was another aspect to this that was important. Young people, who did not grow up in loving homes, or who have never heard the Gospel of Jesus, don't have the life experience to make sense of a simple statement such as "you have a Father in heaven who loves you." The church has to *make sense of this statement* to such young people by demonstrating the love of the Father to them with our thoughts, words and deeds. Only when such has been shown to them in a real, tangible way, do the preacher's words make sense. Jesus taught me, during this time, preaching is not enough. Not that I ever thought it was, but I learned in a new, deeper way, that sacrificial love must function as John the Baptist, preparing the way for the preached word.

Since the beginning of my ministry, I have always taken seriously the instructions of the Lord Jesus, to "Ask the Lord of the harvest to send labourers into the harvest field" (Matt 9.38). St. Alban's can be lonely and intimidating. But Jesus answered my prayers and sent Cassie Dodds, Tripp Koon, and a host of amazing volunteers and student leaders to support the work. Jesus has always been faithful to answer that prayer, among many other prayers! I'm grateful that he has not grown weary of me.

### *Conclusion*

This should give you a better sense of Jesus's work in my life, as well as my own working out of Jesus's call in my life. I'm grateful for this process. I'm grateful for being requested to submit the story of Jesus's work in my life. Participating in this discernment process has also helped me think about the things I value in ministry, which are the things God has placed in my heart. Having read the Diocesan profile, I was able to see the heart of the diocese as well. For those who might seek Episcopal leadership, I suppose the temptation will be to conform their heart to the heart of the diocese. However, I have never, nor am I now seeking episcopal leadership. Therefore, this process has helped me clarify what I care about, and what I hope to spend the second half of my ministry doing.

***I value and care for young people:*** Regardless of what God calls me to, I will spend the second half of my ministry focused on supporting Christian young people and evangelizing non-Christian young people. This is something Jesus put deeply in my heart while at St. Alban's. It cannot be done from inside the wall of the church, but one must step outside the building and seek out the lost, as Jesus did.

***I value and care for Racial Reconciliation, Justice, and Civil Rights:*** Working at St. Alban's has caused me to encounter a level of vulnerability in our society among certain people that was unknown to me before. The scriptures speak clearly that the church must be active participants in justice as do the vows of the bishop, which ask if the candidate will "show compassion to the poor and the strangers, and to defend those who have no helper."

***I value and care for the poor:*** Taking Jesus at his literal word, while serving at Trinity Myrtle Beach, alongside fellow Christians whom Christ had also taken captive to his word, taught me



that the poor are sacred to God. In fact, Martin Luther, in his own 95 Theses, declared the poor, alongside the Gospel, are the true treasures of the church. Hugh Latimer boldly announced before King Henry VIII, that if he wanted to seek the living Jesus, he was to be found amongst the poor. It is a scriptural imperative. It is an explicit feature of episcopal orders, and it is woven into our own Anglican heritage.

***I value and care for Theological Education:*** My experience at Oxford taught me that advanced theological education has direct benefits for the soul care of Christians and the proclamation of the Gospel to non-Christians. I am active in an international, ecumenical team of scholars, and I believe this is a net benefit for St. Alban's and the wider church.

These are the things I will commit myself to, no matter what. I am not seeking episcopal leadership, but *I am seeking discernment*. Now you know the story of Jesus in my own life, as well as the things he has worked deeply into my heart. Through your prayers, counsel, and questions, I hope we can together discern what, if any role, I might play in this process. I am open to God, as well as to you, on what might be determined.