

The Reverend Chris S. Warner Spiritual Autobiography

I was not raised in the Christian faith though I was baptized in the Catholic Church as a newborn. I believe God's work in me started then, though the faith of my baptism did not come alive until I was in college.

My childhood was tumultuous. This began when my father returned from the Viet Nam war with undiagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder which he medicated through alcohol and drugs. My dad left my mother and me and they divorced when I was just a toddler. He wandered in and out of my life throughout my childhood with many broken promises related to his addiction. Years later (1997), by God's grace and through much forgiving on my part, I had the privilege of leading my dad to faith in Jesus Christ before he died of Agent Orange related cancer.

Not long after my parents divorced, my mother moved in with another man who did not like children and was verbally abusive (whom she eventually married), and in time we moved to San Francisco CA. It was the early 1970's and though they were both medical professionals (a physician and a nurse), they were also hippies. My early memories include the hippie lifestyle and attending festivals and concerts (like the band the Grateful Dead). It was chaotic and anxiety-filled for me.

During my childhood there was one person who was a stable and godly presence. It was my grandmother (my father's mother). She glowed with the love and joy of Jesus. And while I didn't really understand her faith at the time, I knew I wanted the peace and safety and joy I felt whenever I visited her. She took me to church and gave me my first children's Bible. I thank God for the influence she had upon me and cannot underestimate the powerful effect her love and prayers had for me.

Eventually my step-father was offered a position as head physician of ICU at a major hospital in Los Angeles and we moved to Altadena CA. Our lives shifted considerably as we moved to the suburbs. I spent the next few years in the midst of an affluent culture and a lifestyle that included private schools, symphonies, art museums, intellectualism, and social climbing. However, the chase for satisfaction through materialism never ultimately satisfies, and by the time I entered high school they separated. My mother and I moved from our large home in the heart of the suburbs to a small apartment above a parking garage in downtown Pasadena. It was a huge shock for me.

I spent the first year basically on my own because my mother worked nights and verged on a nervous breakdown. As hard as it was, this was when God began working in me in earnest. I attended a Catholic boys' high school because it was the only safe school in the area. I was fascinated with my religion class, began learning how to pray to God, and couldn't stay away from the Mass. Though I had not grown up in church and had never made a first communion, one of the Brothers saw my spiritual hunger and allowed me to receive the Sacrament each week. By the end of the school year, I had established new friends, was active in sports, and even began to feel some security again. The next shock came when my mother moved us across the country to

Charlotte, NC where our extended family lived. I was devastated and lashed out in rebellion and anger.

High school became a blur of alcohol and drugs for me. I also began listening to and following the Grateful Dead. And while occasionally I prayed to God, I didn't yet know Him personally. My mother, on the other hand, came to faith reading a Bible that someone had given her. She began attending a Spirit-filled and evangelical Episcopal Church. She got involved in prayer ministry and had an intercessory prayer group which began to storm heaven on my behalf.

Upon graduation, I attended the University of North Carolina Wilmington - mostly because it was far away from home and was at the beach. Between classes I followed the Grateful Dead on their tours of the east coast. I slid further and further into hedonistic self-destruction. During my Sophomore year I was at a Grateful Dead concert and encountered real, spiritual darkness as I helped a young man who was overdosing on drugs. I didn't believe in the demonic and had no categories for it, but I suddenly encountered it. I began seeing that the culture of "peace and love" that I thought I was part of was actually very dark.

Some of my friends, who like me were from broken and/or abusive homes, began joining the Rainbow family. This appeared to be the inner core of the Deadheads from which many of the drugs originated. It was very cult-like and I was pressured to join. Over time, the pressure grew for me to get in or get out of the Dead scene completely.

Eventually I was at a concert at RFK stadium in Washington DC when things came to a head. During the concert I realized I needed to leave; my life was crumbling and I couldn't be part of this lifestyle anymore. As I started out of the stadium, I became overwhelmed with terror. As I stood there shaky under fear and spiritual darkness, I suddenly had the sense that Jesus was standing right next to me. I didn't see anything or hear anything; he was just there and the fear began to recede (incidentally I had not used any drugs so it was not a hallucination). As I turned for one last look back, I had a vision of a vortex spinning down into hell with many people dancing their way into darkness and laughing hideously while blaspheming God as they went. It rattled me to the core. I fled from the stadium and as I waited by the car for my friends to return after the show, I got on my knees and prayed, "Please God help me!" I don't know how long I prayed, but my prayer ended with, "I love the Lord God Jesus Christ."

I travelled home to Charlotte, NC. Upon arrival, I told my mother that I thought I had met Jesus and asked her what I should do. She arranged for me to meet with her Rector the next day. I was confident he would reject me but he didn't. He listened to my story and gave me a Bible telling me to read the Gospel of John and then the other gospels. He said, "You'll know whether the Jesus you met is the real Jesus if he conforms to the Scripture." As I began reading, and then devouring the Gospels, I saw that I had indeed met the real Jesus. I was amazed by the way He went to the outsiders, the irreligious, the broken and lost. He reserved his harsh critique for the self-righteous religious insiders, but accepted the lepers and outcasts and prostitutes. I remember distinctly thinking, "Those are my people! That really was Him that night!"

That began a journey of spiritual and emotional healing in me that God continues to use in the hearts and lives of others. I learned to rejoice in worship and have since developed a deep love for God that has never abated. I grew to value the Scriptures passionately as the Word of God. In time I received a powerful infilling of the Holy Spirit, an anointing for God's service, and the release of my spiritual gifts.

At the end of college I began to sense a call to proclaim the Gospel and entered into discernment toward ordination at St. Margaret's Episcopal Church in Charlotte. I served as a youth pastor and regularly saw students and others coming to Christ through my ministry. I met Catherine and we were married in October of 1993. Almost immediately she became pregnant with our first child Anna. I spent the next few years working in corporate America until we went to seminary at Trinity (Episcopal) School for Ministry in 1997. Our other children, Caroline and Nathan, were born while we attended Trinity. Both were baptized at St. Stephen's in Sewickley where I served in field ministry as a seminarian. Our time at Trinity was particularly challenging for us because my wife Catherine experienced a severe postpartum depression following the birth of our children. By 2000 I graduated with an MDIV with Honors, having written a thesis called, "Ministry in a Postmodern Context: Reaching Out to Generation X." I was ordained a deacon in the Diocese of Pittsburgh by the (Most) Right Reverend Robert Duncan.

After seminary, I was called to serve as Curate at Trinity Episcopal Church, a traditional, downtown parish in Columbus GA. It was a fruitful and challenging season in ministry as I learned much about pastoring and preaching. I saw my gifts emerge as I led Alpha and established a new and eclectic worship service where people were meeting Jesus and growing in community. Our time in Georgia was particularly beneficial for Catherine who received much healing while there.

In 2002, I was called to serve as the Associate Rector of Church of the Holy Cross, Sullivan's Island. We experienced tremendous growth over the next few years as many people came to faith. In 2003, following a time of brokenness within me that God powerfully entered into, I started a men's hiking ministry that revolutionized our parish. Men met Jesus, received healing, and learned to pray, witness, and minister to others. This deeply and positively affected marriages and families in our area. I began to train and release pastors and laity from other churches in this vibrant ministry. Over the years, God has continued to move powerfully through the men's hike ministry that now exists in more than 40 churches, both Anglican and non-Anglican.

In 2007 I was called by Bishop Edward Salmon to serve as Rector of St. Christopher Camp and Conference Center on Seabrook Island, SC. Over the course of four years in this position I oversaw a staff of more than 60 and a multi-million dollar budget. God called me to renew the heart of this gem of the Anglican Diocese of South Carolina and to help transform it into a Spirit-filled ministry of rest, restoration and renewal. This change was challenging but fruitful and came about as I gathered a team of passionate people who served humbly and were released to enact their ministries.

By 2010, Bishop Mark Lawrence's vision for St. Christopher's future had shifted because of the impending threat of litigation by the national Episcopal church. Necessarily, St. Christopher would be stewarded through management rather than growth. After much prayer, I realized that my gift mix was better suited elsewhere going forward and so we entered into a season of discernment for our next call.

We were surprised when the Lord led us back to Holy Cross in 2011 where I served as an Associate Priest. I was tasked by the vestry to help "close the back door" of the parish. The church was proficient at welcoming people in through programs, excellent preaching and music, but because it was not focusing on developing mature disciples, people continually left. I began developing infrastructure and systems to help the church live into its large, multi-campus size.

In the middle of 2014, the Reverend John Burwell, then Rector of Holy Cross, informed me that he would be stepping down and asked that I consider succeeding him. Because of the church's unique circumstances related to our complexity and multiple campus format, our significant financial challenges including high building debt, and a tired and disgruntled laity, Bishop Lawrence and the vestry concurred that I was the right person to be Rector for the next season of Holy Cross' life. As Catherine and I prayed, we sensed that this was what the Lord was asking of us and so on January 1, 2015 I became Rector Coadjutor. I was installed as Rector a few months later.

Over the past six years I have led in the development of a relational and discipling culture. Along with my wife Catherine, who heads our Life Group ministry, we are equipping the saints for the work of ministry and have raised up leaders and coaches for 35 Life Groups. We are encouraged to see Life Groups multiplying other Life Groups. My vision is to see a new metric for measuring church success. Rather than only the "ABC's" (attendance, buildings and cash), we're looking for multiple generations of disciples and groups (based on 2 Timothy 2:2). I'm pleased to see this happening as many people engage deeply with the Word of God. We are also implementing spiritual disciplines and practices related to Trinitarian spiritual direction and formation.

By God's grace, we have experienced a turnaround in our church's financial processes and we have gotten out of debt — other than our mortgage, and of that, we have paid down more than a million dollars. People are meeting Christ. The church is growing missionally and in love for God and others. Things are moving in a good direction. I am confident that if God wants me to remain there, I have many good years of ministry ahead at Holy Cross.

Why then am I considering the possibility of serving as the Bishop Coadjutor of ADOSC? Because I believe the Lord is asking me to consider it, and to discern it in the context of community. Since 2018 God has been leading me to discern a potential call to serve as a bishop. This first began with a mentoring conversation I had with the Right Reverend Trevor Walters. It grew while listening to Scripture at Caesarea Philippi in Israel in 2019. In 2020 I was approached about allowing my name into consideration for bishop in the Diocese of the Great Lakes. Most recently I have been approached by

a number of people for the ADOSC process. As I have prayed, listened, and sought confirmation from God in Scripture, I am convinced He wants me in this. From my earliest days as a Christian, my answer to Him has been and continues to be: “Yes, Lord.”