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My Spiritual Journey and Calling

Throughout my childhood and into adulthood, I had always believed in and felt the presence of Jesus Christ. As a young boy, my father was not in the picture all the time. My invisible friend would take me fishing, take me on hunting trips and teach me the things a father would do. Jesus was always there for me, whenever I wanted or needed a relationship with him. At times, when life seemed to be going well and I drifted away, if I stopped and turned around, he was right there. My beginnings with church came when my brother and I lived with our mother's parents. We would attend church, the Missouri Synod Lutheran Church, and Sunday school every week. Every night before bed, my grandfather would read a devotional from their Portals of Prayers. I loved to dress up in my little three piece suit and put my grandfather's pocket watch in my vest pocket. I enjoyed going to church but a lot of what was being preached didn't sit well with me. I went along with it though, attending Sunday school and confirmation classes, memorizing the Apostles and Nicene Creeds.

As a young teenager and living with my mother, the Mormon missionaries started coming over for visits. Initially my brother and I would stay in our rooms while they were there but eventually we would listen more and more. We would visit the homes of other Mormon families for an evening dinner or for an afternoon lunch. At the age of 15, my brother and I were baptized into the Church of Christ of Latter Day Saints. Again, I didn't believe everything that was said to me, but I loved my mother, and this made her very happy, so I went along with it. Always keep my relationship with Jesus internal. I can only remember going to church a couple of times. My mother was very ill and we moved frequently.

We eventually moved back in with our grandparents again and returned to the Lutheran church. Immediately after graduating high school, I joined the military, and my adult life instantly became very busy. I would attend a non-denominational service here and there, but I was never in a place long enough to find a church.

I married at the age of 23 and had 2 boys together. My wife was raised in the Catholic church, but we never went to church regularly. This was an abusive relationship. After 15 years of a difficult marriage that ended in divorce, I found myself at the bottom of a deep hole. I deeply loved my boys, but I was unable to see an end to the abuse.

Even after moving in with someone, I remained in a very dark place. We had a child together and were married but I still found myself totally isolated from everyone. I began to contemplate ending

my life. Finally, I confided in someone, and he said the right words that helped put a pause to those thoughts long enough to find hope. Surprisingly, or maybe not, this person was my divorce attorney.

During the last year of my second marriage, I began having a conversation with a group of friends online around the possible spiritual meanings behind dreams. This later became a very devoted prayer group that I went to for prayer requests and I offered my prayers when someone was in need. One of the members of this group said that she felt led to suggest to me to start attending a church. I asked her what church she attends, and she said the Mormon church. I held my mother in high regard as I did my friend, so I reached out to the Mormon and began seeing the missionaries every Friday during lunch at a park behind a fast food restaurant. I know my wife at the time would never agree to visits at our apartment, so this arrangement worked out. I remember walking back to work after my first meeting with missionaries. I felt like my chest was about to burst, I was so filled with the Holy Spirit.

Church service lasted 3 hours and I enjoyed every minute of it. I believed Joseph Smith was a prophet. I was baptized again and later received the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthood. Despite being mocked at home for believing in God, I kept going. But then I began to question some of their beliefs and practices. I had been in the Masons for several years by this time and I found out that Joseph Smith was Mason. Going through the ritual to be baptized was a process that was divided into 3 phases and these phases had many similarities to the phases of becoming a Master Mason. I thought that this was very interesting at the time, but this had started to not sit well with me. The Mormons were also against the LGBTQ+ community. I was told that you can be gay, just go do it somewhere else. This, along with being required to wear specific undergarments, and other requirements, after about 2 years I stopped going.

A burning desire rose up in me to start over. I wanted to know what was in the scriptures, what was the word of God and forget everything I had learned so far.

A friend of mine was in an online bible study group, and I started to watch with him. Most of the people were in Tennessee and the lead minister was a friend of his. Everyone in this group had been traumatized by organized religion in one way or another. This was a safe place to be vulnerable and be open and honest about your beliefs and share your experiences. We all had trauma, and we all had testimonies of God's grace and mercy.

My friend was laid off and asked me to help him move back to Tennessee. We were going to stay with the lead minister of this online faith community. I helped him pack up and I stayed there for a few days to help him get settled. The three of us spent all of our time talking about scripture, about God's grace, about God's mercy. We talked about serving breakfast to the homeless. We would call it Pancakes and Prayers. Staying an extra day I asked if I could lead the next bible study. I dove in and researched all of the scripture references and wrote out all of my answers to the questions in the study guide.

At one point in my studies, I was standing in the living room, deeply immersed in reading, when something extraordinary happened. Suddenly, I was observing myself from a few feet away. The room seemed slightly hazy, but I felt a profound sense of peace that transcended any physical sensation. There was no hunger, no pain, no worldly desire - just a pure, complete tranquility. In that moment, I understood this was more than just an experience - it was a divine glimpse beyond our physical reality. God was revealing a fractional view of what existence could be, showing me a state of being unencumbered by earthly limitations. I realized then that this was all that I wanted to do, and I wanted everyone to have this experience. I returned back home to Salem filled with awe at this revelation.

One day, as I was walking home, I heard an unmistakable voice. It was crystal clear, saying only one word and saying it only once, "minister". I looked around but no one was near me. I lifted my eyes upward to the clear blue sky, completely confused, and I replied back "Ok, I don't understand but Ok, you're in charge".

I began taking free online courses at Christian Leaders Institute and after 2 years I received my ministry license certificate, license to be a wedding officiant and a letter of good standing. From time to time, in between courses, I stopped for a little self-reflection questioning whether I was doing this for God or for some sort of selfish ego trip. I realized every time that this is something that I cannot not do, this is God's plan for me.

My personal experiences - from feeling isolated to discovering truly inclusive spiritual communities - taught me that faith is about love, not judgment. When my youngest child came out as transgender and my wife's child as non-binary, I knew we needed a church that embodied true acceptance. The United Church of Christ became that sanctuary - a place where curiosity is celebrated, and love knows no boundaries.

There is beauty in everyone. Try to see them through the eyes of our Father, the creator of the vast universe, and you.