

## Spiritual Autobiography – The Rev. Peter Frank

In the last few years, I have embraced genealogy as a hobby. One of the things I have enjoyed uncovering is how being a Christian has been the life-shaping characteristic of many of my ancestors.

Being an Anglican Christian, on the other hand, is a little weird. In fact, so far as I can tell, I am the first Anglican priest in our family tree for about 400 years. Instead, I come from a long line of congregational ministers, independent Baptist missionaries, some Salvation Army officers and even a South Seas captain who sailed the “Morning Star” missionary ship around Micronesia in the 1870’s. My parents kept up our family tradition of faith and full-time Christian ministry. For them, that meant running Baptist camps, first in Iowa, then in Ohio, and finally in Minnesota.

A Christian camp is a great place to grow up. I was surrounded by role models. I heard my need for salvation clearly and simply explained many, many times each summer. It was natural for me to respond to it, and I did. I still remember praying the sinner’s prayer with my mom on the front porch of our house when I was five or six years old.

There was a challenge, though, one that is important to understanding my story. I knew I had prayed the sinner’s prayer. And I knew I had felt something when I did. But even very early on, I noticed that the feeling hadn’t lasted. Not only that, but I didn’t always live or think in the way that Christians are supposed to. That made me question: was I really a Christian, or did something not take?

All I knew to do was to try harder and ask Jesus into my heart again (and again). So, that is what I did.

By time high school came around, I was carrying some real contradictions. On one hand, I was a leader at my school and in my church. My senior year, I was the student body president, salutatorian, and a National Merit Scholar. I was arguably one of those “influencers” church youth ministers love to have around. I brought my friends to our youth group and even led one of them to convert. At the same time, I really wasn’t sure I was “in” myself. I knew my own doubts and failures well. While they weren’t massive ethical failings, they seemed incompatible with being a real Christian. When I went to college these contradictions soon became unsustainable. I reached a point of crisis in my sophomore year. For lack of a better way to put it, I just didn’t have it in me to hold everything together anymore. The way out was to not believe in God, and I took it. I remember making that decision in my dorm loft one night and suddenly being aware that not believing meant that the universe was a cold and empty place, to quote Shakespeare’s Macbeth, “*a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.*”

My road back to belief was gentle and played out over several months. Probably the most important part of that journey was an opportunity to re-evaluate from the outside what Christianity was and what it taught.

I went to an ELCA Lutheran college (Concordia College in Moorhead, MN). There, I had to take required religion classes. One of those required classes forced me to do something I hadn't done before: read Martin Luther, particularly his Commentary on Galatians and Bondage of the Will. Those books were lifechanging. In them, I found my experience of faith and doubt, success and failure, described as normal for Christians instead of seeming abnormal. For the first time, I heard the Gospel in a way that really sounded like good news. I heard that Christ came to save sinners and that Christians are justified not by what they do for Christ or how they feel about Christ, but through their faith in Christ – and that even that faith is a gift from God.

The second domino to fall had to do with what it meant to have faith. Part of my walking away from Christian faith was because I no longer felt like I had all the answers for the critiques that smart people had of Christianity. Hebrews 11.1 says *“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”* I had somehow picked up the habit of focusing on the assurance part of this verse. I skipped over the fact that there are times that faith requires a leap toward what we cannot yet see.

It was here that I had a moment I can only describe as a reconversion. I was sitting in a computer lab (do colleges still have those I wonder?) on Easter Sunday evening. My Resident Assistant was also there. We started talking. Somehow the conversation turned to belief. He, an atheist disciple of Nietzsche, made an offhand comment to the effect that faith involved a choice, not an answer to a math problem. I was staggered. I realized that for years, when I talked about belief and faith, what I had meant was proof and knowledge. It had never really occurred to me that I could choose to believe even when I didn't really understand everything clearly.

In that moment, I also realized having faith in the good news of the Gospel was something I wanted to have. So, I claimed it then and there. Much to my Resident Assistant's bemusement, I looked at him and said something to the effect of “Now I'm a Christian again.”

Finally, I needed a church to call home. It may seem surprising, given how powerful reading Martin Luther was in my reconversion, that I didn't end up in a Lutheran church. Part of this was theological – I went to a more liberal Lutheran college, and then, as today, progressive Christianity had never made a lot of sense to me. I also was uncomfortable with some strands of Biblical interpretation in Lutheran theology. Yet, the more important part of me becoming an Anglican Christian was practical and relational. I got invited by a professor to Wednesday Evensong at St. John's, a little Episcopal church about three blocks from my college campus.

I went, and, before the last note was sung, I somehow knew that this is where I would go to church and that this was the kind of Christian I wanted to be. Many things came together to make Anglican Christianity the place I landed. The gateway was beautiful worship. I had grown up being bored by church services. I always assumed that was my fault. In that Evensong service, and then later in Sunday Eucharist, I encountered “the beauty of holiness” for the first time and was just blown away. I had found worship that seemed big enough for an awesome God. I also gratefully received the sacraments. In them, I understood that God objectively and gracefully came to me

based not on my own deserving or on my feelings in a particular moment, but on His love brought near to me through his Son.

Also important to me at that time was the comprehensiveness of the Anglican way. While many theological issues have clarified and sharpened for me as time has gone on, being in a church that had room enough for me to read Martin Luther and Thomas Aquinas (another favorite I discovered in college) at the same time was life-giving. Finally, I appreciated the rootedness of Anglicanism. Given the very important things I missed in the Christian world in which I grew up, I was skeptical of the assumption that 20<sup>th</sup> century American Evangelical Christianity was exactly what Jesus intended when he founded the church. I wanted a way to be a Christian that continued to embrace the central truths of the Reformation, but also didn't toss the pre-Reformation baby out with the bath water.

Did I know what I was getting into? Well, not exactly. My mental picture of Anglican Christianity as a moderately reformed church that worshipped in the catholic tradition and the reality of the Episcopal Church in the late 1990's had a lot of daylight between them. But that realization would build over time.

In that moment, I had found my spiritual home, and I was deeply grateful for it. I also was set free to explore a calling toward ordained ministry I had felt since I was a teenager. When I had first sensed this, it appeared to be a dead end. Being the son of a Baptist camp director, I had a pretty good idea about what ministers in that church did and what their life was like. For lack of a better way to put it, my response to God at the time was something like, "You know I can't do that, right?"

God knew. As I settled into St. John's, I could see myself in ordained ministry for the first time. But it also became clear to me that going straight from college to seminary wasn't the best way forward. I thought that I should spend some time in the secular workforce to make sure my sense of call wasn't just a disguised desire to keep going to school and to give me some time to mature a bit. So, after college graduation, I became a small-town newspaper editor and did what I assumed Anglicans did. I found the Episcopal church nearest to where I lived and started attending.

That meant going from the small but spiritually committed, dynamic and orthodox congregation close to my college, to a small, struggling and often spiritually anemic parish near to my new home. There, I served in many roles from acolyte master and lay eucharistic minister to vestry member. I become someone members of the congregation wanted to talk to about spiritual issues. While I loved serving in worship and the people of this little church, I struggled to receive any kind of spiritual nurture myself.

Still, I knew that this little church was exactly where God wanted me to be. He did some important spiritual work in me during those years. There was a time after my reconversion experience that I didn't have any time for things that felt "too evangelical." Then, I got to see what church looks like without those evangelical things. I had to acknowledge that Christianity offers very little to cling to without a personal commitment to Christ and trust in His Word.

Other things were happening in my life as well. Most importantly, I met the woman who would become my wife, Andrea. We were married on January 4, 2003. But even before our marriage, we realized I needed to either confirm or deny the sense of call I had to ordination.

By this point, it was also clearer to me that I was an outlier in the Episcopal Church and particularly in my home diocese of Minnesota. I couldn't imagine any kind of Christianity worth pursuing that didn't trust the Bible and place itself under its authority. While my rector encouraged me to go forward in the diocesan ordination process, a conversation I had with the diocesan canon to the ordinary made it clear to me I just couldn't do it there. The sticking point was that right up front he wanted me to know that the two seminaries I wouldn't be allowed to attend were the only two Andrea and I could really imagine attending: Trinity and Nashotah.

After a lot of prayer and conversation, we did a risky and, in some ways, rebellious thing. We quit our jobs, rented a U-Haul trailer, and moved to Ambridge, Pennsylvania, to start taking seminary classes. We did it without a sponsoring diocese and with about \$6,000 in savings.

Our timing was interesting. We arrived at Trinity in August of 2003, just days after the Episcopal Church General Convention of that year. It was clear that whatever the future held, it was not going to be business-as-usual in the evangelical wing of the Episcopal Church.

Spiritually, Trinity continued the work that God had already begun of reconciling me to my evangelical roots within an Anglican context. It was there that I fully realized I didn't have to choose between personal faith and beautiful worship, between the Bible and the sacraments.

Trinity also got me a new job, or more exactly, Wicks Stephens did. When I arrived at Trinity, the seminary noticed my journalism background and put me to work for the school writing press releases and helping with their website. Wicks was my supervisor at the time. Evidently, it only seemed natural to Wicks to recommend me to the Diocese of Pittsburgh when they suddenly needed a communications director in the spring of 2004.

I was taken aback when Wicks told me he had done this. I was at Trinity to discern a call to ordained ministry, not to get a full-time job downtown at the diocesan office. In my prayers, I had a clear sense that choosing whether to go downtown for an interview with Bishop Duncan, Bishop Scriven and Canon Hays was a very consequential decision, for good or for bad. But the word Andrea and I got is basically the same word I have received again and again when facing consequential choices in life: "Take the next step and keep praying."

It's hard to know where to even begin when evaluating what my next six years on the diocesan staff, the Anglican Communion Network staff, and finally the Anglican Church in North America staff meant spiritually. I grew a lot. I came to love the people and churches of the diocese. I got to help birth the Anglican Church in North America –

something I will always be proud of. At the same time, I bear some spiritual and emotional scars from those years. From the very beginning, I felt like I had been tossed off the deep end into a practical and spiritual conflict of epic proportions. I went from being a small-town newspaper editor to talking with the New York Times, NPR and the Associated Press. I transitioned from attending press conferences in northern Minnesota to organizing them in Jerusalem. Still, I liked the work and found I was good at it. God gave me the gift of being able to speak and write on Bishop Duncan's behalf in a way that he could trust. I also felt like I had something to offer to the diocese and beyond that was worthwhile and needed: to be a point of stability and (at my best) principled clarity and charity in a truly painful and spiritually confusing time for many of us.

Working full time for the diocese meant slowing down my path toward ordination. Yet, I remained convinced that Andrea and I moved to Ambridge to discern a call to ordained parish ministry. Thankfully, Bishop Duncan and the diocesan leadership were supportive of that. The diocese gave me time to take a seminary class or two a semester, and Church of the Nativity in Crafton took me on as a seminarian. I started preaching and teaching there and, in due time, moved through aspirancy, postulancy and candidacy.

I was ordained to the transitional diaconate in June of 2008, just as our diocesan conflicts with the Episcopal Church were reaching their climax. After it became clear that Nativity was not in favor of realignment, I asked to be moved to Grace Edgeworth and Mount Washington. Our time there was healing and hopeful for both Andrea and me and a great introduction to ordained ministry. I still treasure my long diaconate.

In 2010, I was priested on February 7 at Grace, Edgeworth, in the aftermath of a major snowstorm. That May, I finally finished my M.Div. and was able to begin thinking seriously about moving into full-time parish ministry. I had one prayer request I consistently made as I sent off resumes and interviewed for open positions: no lawsuits! I felt like I had served my time in the church wars. I wanted some peace – or at least fewer consultations with attorneys.

The church I was called to was Church of the Epiphany in Herndon (now Chantilly), Virginia. Not only was their just-expanded 44,000 square foot facility caught up in a lawsuit, but the congregation itself was in turmoil after my predecessor, the associate rector, had been forced to resign.

I remember praying and thinking, "Really, God?" But it was also clear that Epiphany was the call God had for us and had in fact been preparing us for. So, in January of 2011, I began work as the Senior Associate Rector. I oversaw a facility we would lose to the Episcopal Church in May of 2012, a preschool we wouldn't be able to keep, and a staff of eight that had lost confidence in the rector. As I arrived, things were so discouraging that entire ministries founded by Epiphany were moving *en-masse* to other churches.

I did a ton in the next few years, including organizing our move-out from that building, stabilizing the staff, moving into a newly leased space after worshipping in a hotel ballroom for a while, and helping the congregation work through their pain and

disappointment after all that had happened to them. I found out I was a pretty good priest.

But there was one thing I didn't understand: why wouldn't Epiphany grow? I have some administrative gifts and was able to fix lots of organizational problems we faced. We built an outreach relationship with our local elementary school, reworked our mission statement, and balanced our budget. But there we were in 2014, about 10 percent smaller than when I came in 2011.

Over time, I've realized this was really pride rearing its head in me (and some unreality; churches that lose their building, move twice, and are working to recover from a church-splitting staff failure over a few years don't tend to add new members left and right). I have also realized that you can't rush spiritual grief and healing.

For those lessons to really be driven home, I had to become the rector, which I did when the previous rector retired in August of 2014.

I did not understand the spiritual intensity of being a rector until I became one. That intensity has encouraged me to invest more in caring for my own spiritual health. The foundational thing I have learned is how important it is to ask people to pray specifically for me and my work on a regular basis. I have had an occasional personal prayer letter for 15 years that I have depended on more since 2014. I am blessed that Epiphany also has a very strong intercessory prayer ministry which I reach out to regularly. Another support has been close, mutually pastoral relationships I have with many other rectors. I always have someone to call or go get a cup of coffee with when I have a pastoral situation to sort through or just need some encouragement.

When it comes to the work I have done as Epiphany's rector, there have been definite high points. We finished a final move into a long-term church home for Epiphany in March of 2018. We fully funded the \$1.5 million project to refurbish it. I have officiated at scores of baptisms, participated in a few *bona-fide* conversions, and built fruitful outreach relationships, most recently with an assisted-living facility near our new location. My family has also grown – our daughters are Cecilia (11) and Clare (8). We have formed deep friendships with lovely people here at Epiphany. To be honest, except for discerning that participating in Pittsburgh's search for a new bishop is something we should do, our plan and hope has been to stay at Epiphany for the long-term.

I have been careful about my involvement in national and international Anglican affairs over the last 11 years, but I have done my best to be useful and to support my bishop and diocese. Currently, I am chair of my diocese's examining chaplains – the body responsible for the academic preparation of candidates for ordination. I do hold one national church role. I am a member of the ACNA's dialogue with the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod and Lutheran Church – Canada. I was also glad to serve a term on the inaugural standing committee of the Diocese of the Mid-Atlantic between 2011-14. Finally, I was honored to return to GAFCON in Jerusalem in 2018 as a member of the worship team and to be the clergy emcee of the closing Eucharist.

There have also been low points since I have been rector of Epiphany. I have had to work through some difficult relationships. I struggled with the hard reality of a continued decline in attendance the first few years of my rectorship. While Epiphany today is financially healthy and, between livestream and in-person attendance, at a high point when it comes to Sunday engagement, I would be not telling the whole story if I said the COVID-19 era has been fun.

Some of these stresses caught up with me in the fall of 2018. I started experiencing unexplained pain, anxiety, and fatigue in the aftermath of a traumatic event – the suicide of a congregation member that happened immediately as I returned from a sabbatical. I kept working, but just didn't feel right. Over the next 18 months I visited doctors and underwent a battery of tests for everything from Lyme Disease to cancer. Thankfully, though confusingly, no one could find anything physically wrong with me.

About a year ago, everything finally fit together for a specialist to whom I had been referred by my doctor. I was diagnosed with fibromyalgia (a pain disorder usually brought on by trauma). I still deal with pain and stiffness, but since then, with physical therapy, daily exercise, and continuing conversations with a psychologist, I have made some real steps forward.

Through this latest twist in my journey, what I have seen God do in me is make me gentler and more prayerful than I was. Suffering isn't fun, especially suffering that can't be "fixed" by anything I can do quickly. But now I have discovered I am more able to come alongside people experiencing pain and suffering. I don't have a plan to fix it, (which is usually far beyond me), but I do have a much-increased willingness to patiently walk with people where they are. I am on the same road.

I have also been slowly learning to be gentler with myself. I am by nature a driven person. I like winning and hate failing. I have been blessed with several natural talents and leadership instincts. Over the years this has made me very productive and successful. At the same time the hardest person for me to forgive when things don't work the way I have planned has been me. What I have come to see is that as a minister, and as a Christian for that matter, I have a job to do, and it is my responsibility to do it to the best of my ability. But my job is more like the work of a farmer than, say, a construction worker. That is, the most important part of any project is always in God's hands. *"I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth"* (1 Cor. 3.6).

I have seen God grow me and grow Christians through me. I trust He will keep doing so.