

Rory Chambers - Brief Faith Journey for Presbytery of New Brunswick, April 2020

I was not raised in the church; I came to faith in my teens through a combination of close relationships, a church outreach group, and my spiritually supportive parents. It wasn't the dramatic opening-of-heaven that I expected but I was committed to following Jesus. Soon afterwards, I was invited into a leadership position with a youth camping ministry that transformed my self-identity and brought several important mentors into my life. For the first few years, I was influenced strongly by conservative evangelical theology, which I have since moved away from. However, that foundation was compelling for me as a young person and gave me a pretty well-prescribed path to walk in. I spent a lot of time studying the Bible and working on conforming my life to what I thought God wanted from me; practically, this meant living what I thought of as personal holiness. It was a very individualistic understanding of what it was to be a Christian. Social action or communal liturgical practices felt optional. It was just me, the Bible, Jesus, and whatever sense I could make of those things without any connection to doctrine or tradition. Nonetheless, I had a sense of direction and purpose which helped me navigate what is always a tricky time for young people.

Alongside the camping ministry leadership, I was also part of a young adult leadership team which started a new congregation, supported by a pastor who was dedicated to helping the whole congregation discover ministry gifts and allowed us a lot of freedom and opportunity in worship planning, service leading, preaching and music leadership. I gained a lot of valuable experience in this environment and I am grateful for the encouragement that met our successes and the grace that held our missteps in stride. It was a local church "of the people, for the people and by the people," which I have sought to emulate ever since.

These experiences helped me identify my core passion for ministry, which led me into high school chaplaincy. The Christian story is an important one for me in making sense of the world and I know that it can be helpful for others as well. However, I know that we do not need to agree theologically in order to create a flourishing community together. This is a significant shift from where I started in the faith. The work of chaplaincy brought me into relationships with a much more diverse community than I had been part of before and challenged me to reconsider many of my beliefs. Most significantly, I was confronted with suffering in a way that the Christian story I had held just didn't speak to. This and further theological study contributed to my theological shift.

Moving to New York, having been on a journey of re-evaluating my theological foundations and hoping for local church community brought us to Broadway Presbyterian Church. Rev Chris Shelton remains a dear friend and was hugely instrumental in my transition to completing my theological study in Princeton. I continued exploring my post-evangelicalism in this new liturgical context and found deep riches in the progressive theology wrapped in traditional liturgy. I've appreciated that the PC(USA) is wide enough to allow for a diversity of theological ideas and approaches, while having a wealth of doctrine to draw from to minimise the cult of personality that churches can become. Learning theology in the USA has been a hugely valuable opportunity to consider issues of race, complicity, and responsibility more closely than I had previously. Really, these topics are a logical extension of the theological move away from an individualistic understanding of faith as I consider my place in broader social systems. My study at Princeton Theological Seminary has continued this trajectory. I am acutely aware that God is on the side of the oppressed and that when voices are excluded from the community, we all miss out on knowing who God is. This basic stance towards the world opens my eyes and heart to recognise God at work all around us, calling us into a life of love, grace, justice and peace.