

## Exhibit J-1

### Journey of Faith: Justin Forbes

I was born into a church going family. I grew up at First Presbyterian Church of Orlando with Dr. Howard Edington as our senior pastor. I remember thinking he must have been a close second to God with his booming theatrical preaching voice. I also remember egging his house in middle school and getting in a bunch of trouble with my parents, but he was not upset at all. The church was a safe and welcoming space for me. I loved going to church. My grandparents were strict Southern Baptists, and most of my extended family was a good bit more conservative, but our family found our way to FPC by the time I was in middle school and that was a very good thing.

Neal Magee was my middle school youth director. A Flagler grad and student of Martha Shinn, I always found it serendipitous to be back teaching youth ministry at Flagler in some part because of his voice in my life. He made room for me, wasted time with me, and showed me an example of welcome that was needed deeply during that time of my life. I remember being a part of confirmation class and being baptized in the process. It meant so much to me, and I was hungry for whatever I could get my hands on with the church. In high school I was as involved as I could be. I learned how to play the guitar to be a worship leader, I helped bring friends to youth group and camps, and it was then that I began to articulate a call to both seminary and ministry. I also articulated that I would need a PhD and that I would study at Princeton Theological Seminary- mainly because the majority of the pastoral leadership had studied there. I look back on these experiences and sense that God was drawing me into a sense of vocation that has honestly not waivered much sense then.

A particularly meaningful experience was a mission trip we took in high school. I kind of cringe now as I type- looking back on a mission trip as the place of conversion- but it is what it is, and I'm grateful. We were in Jamaica with Son Servants, the high school mission trip wing of Presbyterians for Renewal. It was there that I experienced poverty and joy alongside one another that didn't make sense. I had assumed joy could only come in the form of wealth, good looking children and a beautiful spouse. That was the implicit message growing up in a big wealthy downtown church. But on this trip, I began to see through the allure of wealth as a source of joy, instead I was drawn to meaning and community. This would be the beginning of a trajectory that is still playing out today. I had an incredible community of Christian friends in high school, many of whom I'm still in very regular contact with today. This was an incredible gift that I didn't know to appreciate until years later.

I would later graduate from high school and begin studying at the University of Florida. I started taking classes in Hebrew studies and business, but did not seem to find my place. It was at UF that I began looking into campus ministries and started delineating where I felt at home, and where I did not. One afternoon I walked past a guy wearing a Young Life t-shirt. My home church had rented Southwind, a Young Life camp, and so the name was familiar but I didn't know what it was. I ended up feeling prompted to jog back to the guy and ask him about his shirt- yes, an odd thing to do for sure. He walked me to class and we ended up talking for over three hours. His name was Jacob Larson, and he was the local staff person for Young Life in

Gainesville. He explained the concept of mission community to me and I was hooked. It suddenly made sense to me that Christians would gather in fellowship and community all the while having a sense of mission, or sent-ness to their community. I told Jacob that I would be doing this kind of work the rest of my life, he suggested we start with Thursday nights college group, ha! I quickly started attending Young Life and learned of the ability to study youth ministry at Flagler with old Young Life staff people (Les Comee and Martha Shinn). That January I left my full scholarship at Florida to go and study religion, philosophy, and youth ministry at Flagler. Needless to say, my parents had a lot of questions. With time they came around.

It was during this time that I learned of Liberation Theology, read Aristotle and Augustine, studied the New and Old Testament, and got to take incredible courses on youth ministry from Les and Martha. I was introduced to listening as a practice of love. The Kingdom of God became a new way for me to think about life and ministry, and that invited me into a new imagination that would become a foundation moving forward. I decided I needed more study around Old Testament- so I spent a semester in Jerusalem studying abroad. I got to travel all over the middle east, take courses from amazing visiting professors, and spend more time in the Bible than I ever could have imagined. I was hungry and soaking it all up. When I came back from Israel, I knew further study would be a part of my life for sure.

While at Flagler I led a Young Life club at St. Augustine High School and fell in love with youth ministry. I also had plenty of theology in play that led me to overestimate my role in ministry. I remember coming home from club and praying for a list of kids who did not attend, and feeling deeply moved that what we were doing mattered, and that I needed to work harder, think more creatively, or do whatever it took to get those kids to hear the gospel. We took in homeless kids, made a point of being at the high school every day of the week, and began to build our lives around ministry. For the most part this was wonderful, of course I needed a dose of humility and to understand a more reformed manner of approaching ministry (thank God for that!). But that came with time and my eager heart was well intentioned and young.

I began taking courses with Fuller Seminary while on Young Life staff and was introduced to reformed theology with James Torrance. Pages 55-57 of *Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace* redirected my thinking from there on out. Torrance reframed repentance as an act in response to God's prior work versus a human endeavor that initiated or prompted grace. This felt like breathing oxygen for the first time. Freedom and good news and a new way to make sense of my effort, relativizing it to a proper place. I was hungry for more and began taking seminary more seriously.

While on Young Life staff, I began to wrestle with what it means to work with young people who are often overlooked or not included. There were plenty of good youth ministries for typical kids, but I found that kids with disabilities, poor kids, and kids who lived in spaces like group homes were often overlooked. We built our Young Life clubs in two unique ways- first in partnership with local churches, and second with a focus on the kids described above. It made for harder work, but deeply meaningful and hopeful work. As I worked with these young people it became clear to me that I was encountering the Lord in those places in ways I had not

otherwise. I wrestled with themes like God's preferential treatment of the poor as articulated in liberation theology. I developed what I would now call a theological anthropology by working with people with profound disability. All this made me hunger for more theological education in order to articulate what was happening.

After ten years on Young Life staff, I felt called to apply to Princeton Seminary to dig deeper into these questions that ministry had unearthed. I felt a call to personal growth, but also to gain tools needed to better lead others in this work as well. I was confronted by ideas of mission community running up against the extreme need of ministering in under resourced communities. That tension would become a driver of sorts for me regarding my theological education, but also the ways in which God was calling me to wrestle both with ideas and social structures, institutions, and the local church.

Selling our home and much of our belongings with three kids to move to Princeton was one of the scariest yet amazing decisions of our life. It felt like an adventure, we sensed God was calling us to trust and obey and to step out in faith knowing that we would land on our feet somehow somewhere. It ended up being one of the most important decisions of our life. The community we experienced at Princeton, both of classmates and professors, has forever changed my life. I went thinking I would go into church planting and that Darrell Guder would be my guide. I did end up taking every class he offered, but also found a deep well of resources in systematic theology, Christian spirituality, and to my surprise- youth ministry and practical theology. I went to seminary thinking I was done with youth ministry, but ended up taking a course with Kenda Dean only to find a dear friend and mentor. Years later we wrote a book together and I laughed thinking that when I arrived at Princeton, my plan was to avoid all youth ministry related courses.

My time in seminary was incredibly fruitful, a sabbatical of sorts. We went with three children, left with four, and maybe one of the most important parts of our time there was the fact that I was not leading anything. I went through a detox of being needed from my time on Young Life staff. I remember talking with a counselor saying that I wasn't sure who I was when I wasn't running something. I had the time and space to simply be a father, husband, and follower of Jesus. It made for some amazing mornings with coffee and prayer. This was a sacred time for me- and I soaked it all up. I asked Dr. Guder to meet with me every other week to simply process what I was learning, vocational discernment, etc. and he agreed! I look back now and realize that I had an implicit curriculum of spiritual mentorship with Dr. Guder, but also Kenda Dean. Together they both took an interest in me, spent time with me, and invited me into the next stage of spiritual growth and leadership.

While at PTS I began to question this sense of call to church planting, and instead began to feel interested in pursuing a PhD and a teaching ministry. It wasn't long after those first few conversations about doctoral work that Martha Shinn reached out from Flagler and invited me to be her successor. This awoke something in me that has only grown with time. I began to understand my calling as an expression of listening, teaching, and walking alongside young people as they wrestled with how to follow God. I also wrestled with giving myself the freedom

of enjoying this sense of call- in a way, I had been delivered from my own arrogance, believing that I would be a source of salvation for young people. Now, I was invited to show up to Flagler College and look for what God was doing, and how I might get to participate in that work. This was a very different way of imagining my spiritual life and work. It was rooted in more freedom and joy and less in fear or anxiety. I am still working this out, but there was a fundamental shift that took place during that time of study at PTS.

As I began the transition to Flagler, I became acutely aware of my desire to hold together the church and the academe. I loved how I saw professors at PTS walk a line between serving and equipping the church with their scholarship and teaching. This became a model for what I would want to do in my work. Teaching youth ministry at Flagler, a secular school, provided an interesting context for reimagining public witness. I would often be the person called when someone passed away suddenly, or when a student experienced deep loss. My faith was enlivened by this dynamic, it felt like my old Young Life days but from a very different angle- I was now a professor in a teaching role but had the chance to work with folks who would never find themselves in a church. I started praying for my students and adopted a mindset of curiosity- wondering what God was doing in these precious lives. Of course, the worst part of this job is sending seniors off into the world each year- it was almost shocking to me how difficult this would be, each year convinced that we would never again have such amazing students only to find a new class of people coming into the program. I have felt like God has given me permission to challenge and provoke, along with a desire to do so sensitively. I often leave class, even 9 years later now, thanking God for such a gift. I am often overwhelmed with gratitude for this work and can't believe this is my job.

While at Flagler I also began considering the concrete ways that I would tie my work into the local church. Of course, our vision in the program is to serve the local (Northeast Florida) church and to make it a wonderful place to do youth ministry, but I also sensed a call to preach, teach, and serve in the local church. This led me to taking a position at Memorial Presbyterian Church to head up their college ministry. I did this work for five years and had a chance to lead worship, preach, teach, and get more involved in the life of a particular congregation. A particularly significant experience for me at MPC was co-leading a grief share group with Rev. Amy Camp. We sat with people whose lives had been upended by the loss of their spouses or children. One woman had been married for almost 70 years and would express the difficulty of trying to reimagine her life without her husband. She was incredibly vulnerable, gentle, and honest about this pain. It was a conversion moment of sorts for me, I grew in my desire to offer pastoral care because this felt like the most honest thing possible. It felt like encountering the divine in those moments. Part of my ordination journey has been the desire to offer the sacraments within the larger scheme of this pastoral work. To baptize and offer the meal seem only natural when preaching, teaching, marrying, burying, and walking alongside these people I love. I don't think I could imagine my teaching ministry without this eventually being a part of this witness.

My ordination journey started just before I left for Princeton Seminary. This work of discernment and faith development has been a parallel journey to that of my faith. The decision

to leave and go to Princeton was part of what I sensed God calling me to do. I began the conversation with my local church, First Presbyterian of North Palm Beach, about the process of ordination. I knew this would be part of my calling and went to seminary under that assumption. My first semester of seminary every congregation I was a part of (FPC North Palm and FPC Orlando) left the PC(USA) and joined either ECO and EPC. I felt like a man with no country. While at Princeton we had multiple conversations with Darrell Guder and Kenda Dean about how to navigate the process when every congregation we were connected to had left the denomination. I decided to stay with the people we knew for the time being and to discern along the way. Upon getting back to St. Augustine, and after joining Memorial Presbyterian Church of St. Augustine, we began sensing the tension of not being at home with ECO. The church that sent us to Princeton, FPC North Palm had joined ECO and therefore I stayed in the process with them. I took all my exams, was examined by Presbytery, etc. and was at the point of simply needing to schedule my ordination service. I sat on that for three years and just never felt a peace about moving forward. My concern was that ECO was simply becoming PCA + women, and that is what it began to feel like. I was also not at peace with the decision to participate in the divide of the PC(USA). I am convinced that everyone lost with those actions- the PC(USA) lost out on some amazing people and wonderful congregations. The congregations that left lost out on the noisy system and diverse set of viewpoints that was the PC(USA). Regardless, I knew I was not at home in ECO and felt a call to come home to the PC(USA). After opening the dialogue with the Presbytery, it became clear that I would be welcome into that process, but that it would require me effectively starting over with the process. I embraced that reality and now find myself, a few years later, ready for my final assessment. I am grateful for the journey and my sense of call has only solidified along the way.