

JOURNEY OF FAITH, RUSTY BENTON

I don't remember a single Sunday in my childhood that I wasn't in church. I also never remember enjoying being there. I found early in life that God was awesome, but that certain versions of the church were probably not the best fit for me practically or theologically. And, as an NFL fan, being away from home on Sunday cut into my football watching time.

My parents divorced when I was twelve and I quickly replaced time in the church with time with friends, involvement in athletics and playing music.

In high school, a friend asked me to join a church basketball league but noted that if I played on the team, I had to go to church at least sporadically. This was my introduction to the Presbyterian church, and I found it more meaningful than I had any other church experience prior. Although, I still didn't attend regularly.

After graduating high school and finishing a few years of college I joined the US Navy. Soon after I enlisted, Heidi, my wife of thirty-two years now, and I married. We sporadically attended a Presbyterian church during our Navy stint. Once my enlistment ended, I took a job in corporate finance and completed degrees in philosophy and psychology wherein I was asked to deeply explore topics like truth, religion, and what it means to live a meaningful life.

After college, a minister friend asked if I'd considered attending seminary. In response, I asked if he'd considered counseling. We laughed, but through his question a seed had been planted.

After much prayer, discussion with my wife and minister, and the blessing of seeing Mother Teresa in person, I discerned a call to parish ministry.

God sent Heidi and me to Columbia Seminary in 1998. During Seminary I interned in one of the greatest churches ever. In fact, among the staff we referred to the church as "Camelot."

My first call after Seminary was to youth and mission ministry in a church near Nashville TN. The HOS in TN encouraged, taught and guided me in great ways. In TN, Heidi and I welcomed our wonderful daughter Allison.

After two years in TN, I was recruited to serve as one of two ordained pastors in a multi-campus congregation in Richmond VA. The

church was growing rapidly. Our Upward basketball program had over 900 children enrolled. It was a great experience, and I was blessed to add what I could to life in that congregation.

After VA, I was called to a head of staff position in Greenville SC. I served in Greenville for nine years. In that time Allison became a gymnast and volleyball player, Heidi moved into corporate management, and the church discerned a call to focus on mission and outreach as we worked to assist others with struggles of transitional housing, hunger, and poverty.

After Greenville, I was called to a church just outside of Charlotte NC. In many ways, my experience there was similar to Atlanta's "Camelot" church. We focused our thoughts and prayers on discerning God's call and within a few years began an alternative worship service, and multiple community outreach and in-reach ministries which nurtured growth both within the church and within the community.

From Charlotte we were called to parish ministry in Charleston SC. Within a few months of moving to Charleston, Heidi was diagnosed with aggressive breast cancer. She fought it hard and is now in remission. Allison is now a senior in college studying aeronautics.

My time as HOS in Charleston has been unlike any call I've previously experienced. The pastor prior to me in Charleston committed suicide while serving the church. The congregation had been in decline before his death and began to plummet following it. Through God's guidance and Spirit, what was a dying church is now becoming a vibrant one whose congregation has found new life in the belief that God can and does work in incredible ways as we open ourselves to faith in our Lord.

Finally, I am blessed to be called to serve as HOS at Community Pres. Community's passionate love for God and neighbor was immediately evident to me. So also, was their dedication to putting that love to work in the life of both the congregation and community. In my PDP I note that I seek to fervently serve God. It is awesome to find folks who share that passion both for God and for sharing God's love with each other and the world. I'm excited to be able to do life together in Christ with such amazing people! Plus, the PNC rocks!