

Autobiography of Kristofer Stinson

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My life seems to have been marked by continuous, yet constructive, change. Perhaps I might say that, even before I was Reformed, I was ever-reforming. This has shaped in me a comfort in transitions where I have to decide what to keep from what has come before and what to lay down as I engage what is now. Much of this change has played out in spiritual communities that have been a persistent presence in my life. Yet it has also defined my relationships with my family of origin and my found family.

When applied to relationships, change is complex and complicated. Growing up in a conservative, Pentecostal home in California, family was incredibly important to me. The nuclear family was not only held up as the ideal, but my grandparents, mom, dad, and two younger brothers constituted my closest, most intimate, and life-giving relationships. From holidays to vacations, we as a family were with each other through it all, all under the banner of an ‘unconditional love’ that was not dependent on external circumstances.

I moved to Virginia in 2017 to pursue my PhD in the history of religion and completed that journey in 2024. During that time I was able to explore the historical forces that had shaped my family and the churches I was apart of. This program gave me space to ask probing questions about religion, power, change, and sacred stories. I wrote articles on the lingering power of ancient texts, the interplay of religion and empire, the storied roots of antisemitism in American Protestantism, and the promises and perils of literalism. My first book is a history of religion and archaeology that explores the history of literalism (to be published with the University of North Carolina Press in 2026) and my second book project is a religious biography of J.R.R. Tolkien (to be published with Eerdmans Press in 2027/2028). This program also did much to sharpen my sense of call. I finished my PhD not only disenchanted with higher ed, but disenchanted (I now think) *because* it was not a church. In hindsight it seems clear to me that I largely engaged my program and job search pastorally. I already knew that I wanted to serve and work to bridge the gap between the academy and the church. The transformation that took place at the end of my PhD program was the realization that I wanted to do that from the church side of the bridge.

Upon moving to grad school I came out as gay. Suddenly the language of ‘unconditional’ no longer applied to love. My family has continued to try to make our close relationship work, but it has been a rocky process as it has become increasingly ‘conditional.’ As complicated as this change has been, it opened me up to a growing found family that has become just as consistent, intimate, and ritualized through holidays and vacations as my family of origin. Through churches and community organizations, I discovered even more people who also spoke the language of the deep – friends and mentors who have become family. In each of these relationships, I have been amazed at the ways we can laugh together and cry together, how we can be brutally honest and vulnerable with each other in ways I did not quite fully experience growing up. The fact that the depth of family holds together both joy and sorrow has been one of the most lasting lessons I have learned from those around me. I have learned this especially through my fiancé, Ben, whose own experience with love after loss continues to impact me. I met Ben through the LGBTQ

community sports program we both were apart of, an organization that reintroduced me to the joys of community. Life continues to change and my family continues to grow.

By God's sovereign and prevenient grace I attended my first Presbyterian worship service in 2019 at First and Franklin Presbyterian Church. This church quickly became my home, and I became involved as both a liturgist and on the Adult Ed committee. I became an official member in 2020. I became chair of the Adult Ed committee in 2022 (a position I filled until leaving for Seminary) and helped to plan and lead Advent and Lenten devotions as well as classes on Origen of Alexandria, books of the Bible like Ruth and Jonah, sexuality and the Bible, and racial justice. In 2023 I was ordained a ruling elder and served on Session until moving to Seminary. It is this congregation, as well as the people I met through them in the larger Presbytery, that encouraged and empowered me first respond to my call and who, by God's grace, will see me through that response.