

Spiritual Autobiography of Kristofer Stinson

In considering my call to ministry, I used to feel like Jonah: my first reaction was to run from what I have come to learn is outrunable. It is thanks both to the longsuffering grace of God and the patient persistence of those around me that I can reflect on my calling. Since my undergraduate program, I have felt a stirring, an invitation, to join in God's work in the world that has stemmed from the Love that I have come to know. It was in undergrad that the faith of my family of origin went from being my culture to my choice. After taking Intro to Theology, "I felt my heart strangely warmed," as John Wesley would put it, in the sense that I became convinced that God loved me, and so loved the world, in a way that I had yet to believe. My scholarship, education, and lay ministry have all been rooted in that love extended to me from God and the Church. Indeed, it has only been in the last few years that I have come to see how even my scholarly journey has been in tandem with the church – forming my scholarship in response to congregational needs and questions, hoping the stories I uncover will be means of tearing down and uprooting, building and planting.

Unexpected change, extraordinary calls, and New Creation have defined my spiritual journey. This has played out as I have grown from the Pentecostal/nondenominational roots of my origin, through the Church of the Nazarene, to the Presbyterian Church (USA) where I now serve and am seeking ordination. While I still grieve the loss of the communities I was raised in, I also continue to carry many gifts from those traditions. From the nondenominational churches I was raised in I am thankful to have been steeped in biblical stories as avenues to meaning in my own life and that of my community. In the Church of the Nazarene I was introduced to a spiritual community that emphasized the sovereignty of God's love over brokenness and death. This community had a lasting impact on my spirituality and imagination and was the moment that I laid down the mindset from my earlier churches that saw God's sovereignty as power and wrath. It was the Church of the Nazarene that also provided me with role models that held together academic knowledge and heart-felt spirituality and were not afraid to enter into the dark places of peoples' lives. It is this model of ministry that continues to inspire me today. It was also those pastors who first told me they believed I was called into ministry. Although I was not ready to engage that call in undergrad in a non-affirming denomination, they planted a seed that continued to grow throughout my years in graduate school.

The call followed me even as I was forced to leave the Church of the Nazarene that saw my sexuality and call to ministry as antithetical. After stepping away from the church that so shaped me, I was led to a local Presbyterian Church in 2021 that was affirming. My time in this church did much to reshape my imagination that held together my sexuality and spirituality and opened me to the possibility that I could bring my whole self to ministry. This church welcomed me into its life, entrusting me with leadership in ways I no longer believed were possible. The grace of that moment was that this church (and the Reformed tradition) gave me a home when I most needed one – and for that I will be forever grateful. It is the openness and depth of this homecoming that I hope to partner with the church to ever extend anew. Much of this hope has not only blossomed from my own journey but from the relationships I have had with people who have been hurt and turned aside from the church. I witnessed this at a young age when my grandparents, previously ordained ministers, left the church and converted to Judaism. I have witnessed this in the testimonies of LGBTQ Christians who have been shamed and sidelined to such an extent that the church ceases to be a living testament to New Creation. In my pursuit of

being Reformed and ever reforming, I desire to help cultivate a faith communion that people do not have to heal from.

As before, my call to ministry was something that others recognized in me before I recognized it in myself. From that first prompting in undergrad to graduating with my PhD, that call never went away. The ways others recognized my call to ministry became increasingly invitational and affirming as the various ends to the stories I was living out became disenchanting. This supportive community helped me to understand my gifts and desires and assisted me in the needed work of re-imagining what a call looks like. In one conversation from undergrad that, unbeknownst to me, led me here, my pastor at the time, Diane LeClerc, asked me “How does God speak to you?” When I responded that God usually speaks through others, she asked pointedly “And what do those around you keep asking you?” The question of why I am not going into ministry has grown increasingly louder since that day. In another conversation with one of my current pastors, Dottie LaPenta, I asked if it was okay to be nervous about a call to ministry, to feel as though I am not worthy. “Oh Kris,” she responded, “that probably means you are called.” With her assurance that fear was not antithetical to a response, I was gifted the peace to respond to that call, which has, by grace, led me before the Presbytery of Baltimore today.