

I'm A Preachers Kid...That Explains A Lot

By Jeremy Miller

Prologue

I Was Born Into A Church

When people find out that both of my parents were ministers, the conversation usually goes one of two ways. Someone will smile and say, "That must have been interesting," while someone else will ask, "So, what was it really like growing up as a preacher's kid?" I usually smile because there is no simple answer. I could tell a funny story about church dinners, youth trips, or growing up where everyone seemed to know my name before I knew theirs. I could talk about the expectations that came with being the preacher's kid or the unforgettable personalities who filled the churches where I grew up. Every one of those stories would be true, but none of them would tell the whole story. The real story is not simply about growing up in church. It is about how those experiences quietly shaped the person I would eventually become.

As I began writing this book, something unexpected happened. I thought I was collecting childhood memories, but I soon realized I was uncovering the origins of my own life. Every story seemed to answer another question I had never thought to ask. Why have I always been drawn to caring for people? Why did I spend more than twenty-five years working with older adults? Why did I become a social worker? Why do I naturally build community wherever I go? Why do I believe so strongly that caregivers need someone to care for them, too? The more I wrote, the more I realized the answers were not found in adulthood. They were waiting for me in the churches of my childhood.

Long before my own story began, my parents were already on journeys they never expected to take. Interestingly, neither of them originally planned to become ministers. My mom, Dixie, graduated from Indiana University with a degree in Social Work and began her career as a probation officer. She had a heart for helping people long before she ever considered serving a church. My dad, James, graduated from the University of Evansville with a degree in music. His future seemed to be leading in an entirely different direction. Yet God had plans that neither of them could see.

Their paths eventually crossed at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis, Indiana. It was there that they met, fell in love, and discovered a shared calling to ministry. Looking back, I find it fascinating how God brought together two people with gifts that complemented one another so beautifully. My mom's desire to care for people and my dad's love for music and worship became the foundation of the ministry they would share. At the time, they could never have imagined that their decision to answer God's call would eventually shape the lives of three children, influence countless congregations throughout Indiana, and inspire one of those children to spend his own life caring for people.

Perhaps that is one of the first lessons this book has taught me. God often begins writing our stories long before we realize they have begun. The chapters that shape us most are sometimes written before we are even born.

Although most of the stories in this book take place in Bedford and Richmond, Indiana, my story actually began before either of those chapters. I was born on August 6, 1975, in Wolcott, Indiana, where my parents were serving their first church together. Ours was a family of five. My oldest sister, Kara, was the firstborn, followed by my brother, Aaron. I was the baby of the family. Before I ever spoke my first words or took my first steps, I was already surrounded by a church family. Not long after I was born, our family moved to Martinsville, Indiana, where my parents continued their ministry. I was only an infant during those years, so I have no memories of either congregation. I cannot tell you what the sanctuaries looked like, who held me in the nursery, or the names of the people who welcomed our family. Those memories belong to my parents instead of me.

Even so, I have come to believe those churches influenced my life in ways I may never fully understand. Before I knew what faith was, people were praying for me. Before I understood what community meant, people were welcoming my family. Before I learned what it meant to care for others, people were caring for us. Someone probably held me during worship while my parents greeted people after the service. Someone likely smiled at me in the hallway. Someone may have rocked me in the nursery while my mom and dad led worship or visited with church members. Someone probably encouraged my parents during those first years of ministry. Those people likely never imagined that the baby they welcomed would someday write a book reflecting on those early years. I certainly never imagined it. Yet I believe God was already shaping my life through their faithfulness long before I was old enough to remember their names.

That realization has become one of the greatest lessons of my life. We often believe the moments that shape us are the ones we clearly remember, but I no longer think that is always true. Sometimes our lives are formed by people we barely knew, conversations we were too young to understand, and communities that quietly loved us before we could ever appreciate what they were doing. Looking back, I believe the churches in Wolcott and Martinsville became part of the foundation upon which the rest of my life would be built. Their influence may be hidden from my memory, but it is not hidden from my story.

By the time our family moved to Bedford First Christian Church, I was finally old enough to begin collecting memories of my own. Those memories continued years later at First Christian Church in Richmond, where my parents served throughout much of my childhood and teenage years. Those two churches became much more than places where my mom and dad worked. They became the places where I grew up. They were where I learned what community looked like before I even knew the word community. They were where I watched people celebrate births, comfort grieving families, encourage teenagers, support older adults, forgive one another, and quietly show up whenever someone needed help. They were where I discovered that faith was never meant to stay inside the walls of a sanctuary. Faith was something people lived every single day.

Both of my parents were ministers, but ministry was never something they left behind when they locked the church doors. Ministry came home with us every evening. There were hospital visits, weddings, funerals, committee meetings, youth activities, Bible studies, church dinners, late-night phone calls, and unexpected visits from people who simply needed someone to listen. Looking back now, I realize I watched two people devote their lives to serving others, not because anyone expected them to, but because they genuinely believed that was what God had called them to do. They did not simply preach about loving people. They lived it every single day.

As a child, I assumed every family lived that way. I thought everyone's parents knew nearly everyone in town. I believed it was perfectly normal for strangers to know my name before I knew theirs. I assumed every child spent Sunday mornings in church, Sunday evenings at youth group, summers at Vacation Bible School and church camp, and holidays surrounded by church families. I never questioned why our family calendar revolved around church activities because I had nothing else to compare it to. It was simply life.

One of the greatest gifts my mom and dad gave me was not something they intentionally taught through a lesson or conversation. It was something I absorbed simply by watching them. I watched them comfort families who had lost loved ones, celebrate new beginnings, encourage people through difficult seasons, and faithfully continue serving even when they were tired. I watched them love people who were easy to love and people who were difficult to love. Looking back, I also realize that I was watching two very different expressions of care come together. My mom brought the heart of a social worker into ministry. My dad brought the heart of a musician and worship leader. Together, they showed me that there are many ways to serve God and many ways to care for people. Without realizing it, they were teaching me that caring for people was not simply something ministers do. It is something people do when they choose to love others well.

The churches where I grew up were filled with remarkable people. Some stood behind the pulpit or taught Sunday school classes, but many served in ways that often went unnoticed. They prepared meals for families experiencing illness. They visited people in hospitals and nursing homes. They folded bulletins every week without expecting recognition. They taught children, rocked babies in the nursery, washed dishes after fellowship dinners, decorated classrooms for Vacation Bible School, sang in the choir, shoveled sidewalks, mowed grass, fixed broken doors, and somehow always found time to ask someone, "How are you doing?" At the time, those acts seemed ordinary because they happened every week. Looking back now, I realize I was witnessing ministry in its purest form. I was learning that changing someone's life rarely happens in a stage. More often, it happens in ordinary conversations, shared meals, handwritten notes, hospital rooms, and quiet acts of kindness that most people never notice.

Church life was not only meaningful. It was also wonderfully funny. Churches have a way of collecting unforgettable personalities. Every congregation has someone who always sits in the same pew, someone who faithfully brings the same casserole to every church dinner, someone who knows every hymn by heart, someone who has a story for every occasion, and someone who unintentionally creates stories people laugh about for years afterward. As a preacher's kid, I had a front-row seat to all of it. There were youth trips that became legendary, children's moments that

did not go according to plan, church dinners that somehow fed what felt like an entire town, lock-ins, mission trips, Vacation Bible School adventures, and countless moments that could only happen inside the life of a church. Some of my favorite memories still make me laugh today, and many of those stories fill the pages that follow.

Growing up as the son of two ministers also came with expectations. Sometimes I felt like people expected me to behave differently simply because of who my parents were. At times, that felt unfair. At other times, it challenged me to become a better person. Looking back, I realize those experiences taught me one of the most important lessons of my life. Churches are filled with wonderfully imperfect people. Every person carries hopes, fears, disappointments, dreams, and struggles that are often invisible to everyone else. Once I began understanding that truth, it became much easier to extend grace instead of judgment. That lesson has stayed with me throughout my life.

As I look back over the path my life has taken, I can clearly see how those early years quietly shaped everything that followed. Long before I became an Activity Director, I had watched church members create meaningful experiences that brought people together. Long before I worked in senior living, I had watched older adults faithfully serve and encourage younger generations. Long before I became a social worker, I had been watching one every day in my own home through my mom, even before she entered ministry. Long before I listened to Uber passengers tell me their stories, I had spent years watching people share their lives around fellowship tables and in church hallways. Long before I created Mighty Caregivers, I had already spent a lifetime watching ordinary people quietly care for one another. What I once thought were unrelated chapters of my life now seem beautifully connected.

That is why every chapter in this book ends with the same four words: **That explains a lot.** Each story reveals another piece of the puzzle. Some are funny. Some are deeply meaningful. Some took decades for me to fully understand. Together, they explain how a little boy who grew up following his parents from church to church eventually found himself serving older adults, becoming a social worker, encouraging caregivers, and discovering that some of the greatest ministry happens through simple moments of kindness, presence, and compassion.

This book is not intended to be a history of Bedford First Christian Church or First Christian Church in Richmond, nor is it a complete autobiography. It is a collection of memories that became milestones. It is a thank-you to the countless people who shaped my life without ever realizing they were doing so. It is also an invitation for you to look back at your own story and consider the people who quietly helped shape the person you have become.

Whether you grew up in church, grew up as a preacher's kid, or have never stepped inside a sanctuary, I hope you find something familiar in these pages. The names may be different. The places may be different. But I believe we all have people whose quiet faithfulness influenced our lives. Sometimes we recognize their impact immediately. More often, we only see it years later when we take the time to look back.

When I think about those years today, I do not first remember sermons or committee meetings. I remember faces. I remember laughter echoing through fellowship halls. I remember the smell of

church dinners, the excitement of Vacation Bible School, youth group adventures, church camp, mission trips, lifelong friendships, and my mom and dad who faithfully showed me what it looks like to love people well. At the time, I thought I was growing up in church. Now I realize I was being prepared for a lifetime of caring for people. Every chapter that follows reveals another part of that journey, and by the end of each one, I hope you'll find yourself arriving at the same conclusion I did. That explains a lot.

Chapter 1

I Was One of the Lucky Ones

Whenever I meet someone who grew up as a preacher's kid, one of the first questions we usually ask each other is, "How many churches did your family serve?" It is a question that often leads to stories of moving trucks, new schools, saying goodbye to close friends, and starting over again in another town. Many preacher's kids spent their childhood packing boxes every few years, never knowing how long they would stay in one place before another church called their parents to serve. As I have listened to those stories over the years, I have come to realize something about my own childhood.

I was one of the lucky ones.

My family did move, but we did not move often. I was born on August 6, 1975, in Wolcott, Indiana, where my parents were serving their first church together. Not long afterward, we moved to Martinsville while I was still an infant. I have no memories of either congregation, but I believe those churches became the first people to pray for me, encourage my parents, and welcome our family into ministry. Those early years were followed by Bedford First Christian Church, where many of my childhood memories were formed, and later by First Christian Church in Richmond, where I spent my teenage years. Instead of constantly starting over, I had the incredible gift of growing up in churches that became home.

Before my story began, my parents were already following a path they never expected to take. Neither of them originally planned to become ministers. My mom, Dixie, graduated from Indiana University with a degree in Social Work and began her career as a probation officer. My dad, James, graduated from the University of Evansville with a degree in music. Their lives came together at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis, Indiana, where they met, fell in love, and discovered a shared calling to ministry. Looking back, it is easy to see how God used both of their gifts. My mom's heart for helping people and my dad's love for music became part of the ministry they shared together and, without my realizing it, became part of the foundation on which I was raised.

Ours was a family of five. My oldest sister, Kara, was the firstborn, followed by my brother, Aaron. I was the baby of the family. Being the youngest meant I often watched my older brother and sister experience life just a little ahead of me. It also meant I was surrounded by people who cared for me from the very beginning. Before I could understand what church was, I was already being loved by a church family.

As a child, I never thought much about how fortunate I was. Church was simply life. We were there on Sundays, during the week, for choir rehearsals, committee meetings, Vacation Bible School, church camp, fellowship dinners, youth activities, Christmas programs, Easter celebrations, and just about everything in between. I assumed every family spent that much time

at church. I assumed everyone had adults who knew their name, asked about school, celebrated birthdays, and encouraged them as they grew up.

It wasn't until I became an adult that I realized not every preacher's kid has that experience.

Many preacher's kids know what it feels like to finally make friends only to leave them behind. They know what it feels like to walk into another new school where everyone already knows they are "the preacher's kid." They know what it is like to unpack another moving truck while wondering how long they will stay before packing it again. I have always admired their resilience because I know that could not have been easy.

That simply was not my story.

Instead, I found love in the congregations where I lived.

The people of Bedford First Christian Church loved our family. They did not simply appreciate my parents as ministers. They welcomed all of us. They watched Kara, Aaron, and me grow up. They taught us in Sunday school. They smiled when they saw us in the hallways. They laughed with us during fellowship dinners. They encouraged us through childhood and celebrated milestones right alongside our family. Looking back now, I realize they were helping raise three children, even if they never thought of it that way.

When our family eventually moved to Richmond, I discovered that same love all over again. Moving as a teenager could have been intimidating, but before long the people at First Christian Church welcomed us as though we had always belonged there. The youth group became my friends. Adults became mentors. Church members became another extended family. It never took long before unfamiliar faces became people who genuinely cared about me.

That sense of belonging shaped me more than I realized.

When I think back on Bedford and Richmond, I do not first remember the church buildings. I remember the people. I remember conversations in the hallways before worship began. I remember children running toward Sunday school classrooms. I remember the smell of meals being prepared in the fellowship hall. I remember people stopping to ask one another how they were doing. I remember laughter. I remember kindness. I remember ordinary people quietly caring for one another because that was simply what they did.

One of the greatest gifts my parents gave me was not something they intentionally taught through a lesson. They modeled it every day. Both of them genuinely loved people. I watched them celebrate births, comfort grieving families, visit people in hospitals, listen to those who were hurting, and make time for anyone who needed encouragement. Ministry was never something they left at the church building. It came home with us. Without realizing it, they were teaching me that caring for people is not simply something ministers do. It is a way of living.

The church members were teaching me the very same lesson.

Some taught Sunday school. Others sang in the choir. Some quietly prepared meals for families going through difficult times. Others visited people in hospitals or nursing homes. Many simply greeted people with a smile every Sunday morning. At the time, those acts seemed ordinary because they happened every week. Looking back, I realize I was watching hundreds of examples of what it looks like to love your neighbor. I had no idea those simple acts of kindness were becoming part of who I was.

Years later, after spending more than twenty-five years working in senior living, becoming a social worker, serving people living with mental illness, driving Uber, and eventually creating Mighty Caregivers, people sometimes ask why I care so deeply about helping others. I usually think about my career, but if I am completely honest, the answer began long before my first job. It began in the churches where I grew up. It began by watching my parents faithfully love people. It continued as church members quietly showed me what compassion looked like through everyday acts of kindness. They probably never realized that a little boy was watching them, learning from them, and carrying those lessons into every chapter of his own life.

Looking back now, I realize my parents were called to serve those congregations, but those congregations were also serving us. They helped raise three children. They taught us what belonging felt like. They showed us that church is much more than a place to worship. It is a community where people celebrate together, grieve together, encourage one another, and quietly shape lives through simple acts of love.

I know that is not every preacher's kid's story, and perhaps that is why I appreciate mine so much. I was one of the lucky ones. I grew up in congregations where I never questioned whether I belonged. I was loved by people who became an extension of my family. They invested in me, prayed for me, encouraged me, and helped shape the person I would become.

At the time, I thought I was simply growing up in church. Looking back now, I realize I was growing up surrounded by people who were quietly teaching me how to care for others. I have spent the rest of my life trying to pass that gift on to someone else. That explains a lot.

Chapter 2

Everyone Knew My Name

One of the first things I learned growing up as a preacher's kid was that I rarely had the opportunity to introduce myself. Before I ever walked into a classroom, before I shook someone's hand, or before I had the chance to tell anyone my name, they already seemed to know who I was. It happened so naturally that I hardly noticed it as a child. Adults would smile when they saw me, call me by name, and ask how my parents were doing. Church members greeted me as though I had been part of their lives for years, even if our family had only recently arrived. They knew my mom. They knew my dad. They knew my brother Aaron. They knew my sister. They knew our family. Long before I had the opportunity to discover who they were, they already knew something about me.

At the time, I thought that was perfectly normal. It never crossed my mind that most children could walk into a room without anyone knowing who their parents were. I assumed everyone grew up surrounded by adults who seemed to know their entire family history. It was only years later that I realized how unique that experience really was. My identity was often introduced before I ever spoke. People did not intentionally define me by being the preacher's kid, but it became the easiest way for them to place me. It was almost as if they were saying, "We know where you belong. We've been waiting to meet you."

When our family moved from Bedford to Richmond, I discovered that the experience would begin all over again. Everything around me was new. There were new streets to learn, a new school to navigate, new teachers, new classmates, and a new church family. Starting over can be intimidating for any child, but there was one thing that made it easier. I was never a stranger. Before I ever introduced myself, someone would smile and say, "You must be Jeremy. We've heard so much about your family." Those words instantly took away some of the fear that naturally comes with being the new kid. Instead of walking into a room where no one knew me, I walked into a room where people were already extending kindness before we had even met.

Looking back, I realize that kindness was not really about me. It was a reflection of my parents. Both of my parents had earned the respect of the people they served because they genuinely loved them. They were present during life's biggest moments. They celebrated weddings and baptisms. They visited hospitals. They sat beside grieving families. They prayed with people during seasons of uncertainty. They listened more than they spoke. They invested themselves in the lives of others, and because of that, people welcomed our family as though we already belonged. As a child, I simply enjoyed being known. As an adult, I understand that privilege was built upon years of faithful service by my mom and dad.

The churches where we served were remarkable because they were filled with people who understood the importance of making others feel welcome. Hospitality was never something that happened because a committee planned it. It simply happened because that was who they were. Someone always noticed when a visitor walked through the front doors. Someone always introduced themselves. Someone always invited people to sit with them. Children quickly found

themselves surrounded by other children, and adults naturally included newcomers in conversations as though they had been attending for years. Those simple gestures created an atmosphere where people felt like they belonged almost immediately.

As a child, I never appreciated how powerful that gift was. I thought every church was like that. I assumed every community took the time to learn people's names and remember their stories. I thought it was normal for adults to ask how school was going, to remember birthdays, to encourage children after a music program, or to stop and genuinely ask how your family was doing. It was simply the world I knew.

When I look back now, I realize those moments quietly shaped the way I would spend the rest of my life. Throughout my career in senior living, one of the first things I tried to do whenever a new resident moved into the community was learn their name as quickly as possible. I wanted them to know someone had noticed they were there. When families toured our communities, I tried to remember details they shared because I wanted them to feel like they mattered. Years later, while working in mental health and now through Mighty Caregivers, I continue to believe that one of the greatest gifts we can give another person is helping them feel seen. Looking back, I did not learn that in a college classroom or during professional training. I learned it as a little boy watching the people of Bedford First Christian Church and First Christian Church in Richmond welcome others with genuine warmth.

Of course, there were moments when being known as the preacher's kid felt a little uncomfortable. Like every child, I made mistakes. I got distracted. I talked when I probably should have been listening. There were moments when I wished I could quietly blend into the crowd instead of feeling like everyone knew exactly whose son I was. Children naturally want the freedom to discover who they are, and sometimes I wondered if people expected me to behave differently simply because of my parents. Looking back now, I realize those expectations were probably much smaller than they felt at the time. Most people were not watching me because they expected perfection. They were watching because they cared about our family.

That may be one of the greatest lessons I carried into adulthood. There is a tremendous difference between being noticed and being known. Many people notice us as we move through life, but far fewer truly know us. The churches where I grew up were filled with people who made the effort to know one another. They remembered names. They remembered stories. They celebrated accomplishments. They grieved losses together. They carried one another through difficult seasons. They were not simply attending church together. They were sharing life.

Today, whenever someone remembers my name after meeting me only once, I smile because it reminds me of those early years in Indiana. Whenever I make an effort to remember someone else's name, I think about the countless church members who did the same for me. They probably never realized they were teaching a young preacher's kid one of the most important lessons of his life. They showed me that every person wants to know they matter. Sometimes the simplest way to communicate that truth is by learning someone's name, looking them in the eye, and making them feel like they belong.

At the time, I thought everyone grew up that way. I thought everyone had an entire church family cheering them on, asking how school was going, encouraging them after a children's program, and celebrating life's milestones alongside them. It has taken me many years to realize what an extraordinary gift that was. Before I ever understood theology, leadership, or ministry, I understood something much simpler because of the people who surrounded me. I understood what it felt like to be welcomed, to be known, and to belong. Those lessons have remained with me far longer than I could have imagined, and even today they continue to shape the way I try to care for every person I meet. That explains a lot.

Chapter 3

Sitting in the Front Pew

If you had walked into church on a Sunday morning during my childhood, there was a good chance you would have found our family sitting in the front pew. It wasn't because there was a rule that the minister's family had to sit there or because my parents wanted everyone to see us. It was simply where we sat. My mom and dad had responsibilities before and during worship, and being in the front made sense. As a young boy, I never thought much about it. That front pew became my place, and over time, I actually grew to enjoy sitting there. From my seat, I had the best view in the entire sanctuary.

Before the service began, I loved watching the church come alive. Families slowly made their way into the sanctuary, greeting one another with smiles, handshakes, and hugs. Friends caught up on the events of the week while children laughed as they hurried to find their seats. The choir gathered to prepare, musicians quietly organized their music, and elders moved into place for the morning's worship. Long before I understood the order of service, I had come to recognize its rhythm. There was something comforting about watching everything unfold each week. The sanctuary would gradually fill with conversation until the first notes of the opening hymn called everyone together. Almost without realizing it, a room full of individuals became a congregation.

Sitting in the front also meant I could see my parents in a way that most people couldn't. Before the service started, they rarely had a quiet moment to themselves. Someone always needed a conversation, a prayer, or simply a few encouraging words. People shared good news about a new grandchild, asked for prayers for a loved one in the hospital, or quietly spoke about a burden they were carrying. As a child, I watched those conversations happen. As an adult, I realize I was witnessing ministry before the worship service even began.

Of course, I was still a kid. There were Sundays when my attention wandered. I counted the stained-glass windows, studied the patterns in the wooden ceiling, flipped through the hymnal, or watched the sunlight stream through the colorful glass and dance across the sanctuary floor. Sometimes I wondered how much longer the sermon would last, especially if lunch or a ballgame was waiting afterward. I imagine every child has had moments like that, whether they were sitting in the front row or the very back of the sanctuary.

One of the greatest gifts of sitting in the front pew was hearing the congregation sing. I can still remember standing beside my family as voices filled the sanctuary. Some hymns became so familiar that I hardly needed to look at the words anymore. Even today, when I hear certain songs, I am immediately transported back to those mornings in Indiana. Music has a way of preserving memories unlike anything else. It carries us back to places we thought we had forgotten and reminds us of people whose voices still echo in our hearts.

As I grew older, my seat in the sanctuary began to change. I didn't always sit in the front pew anymore, and that felt like a natural part of growing up. Sometimes I sat somewhere in the middle of the sanctuary, and other Sundays. I found myself in the back with my friends from the

youth group. That wasn't because I felt pressure to leave the front or because I was trying to escape being the preacher's kid. In fact, I genuinely enjoyed sitting in the front. It had been my place for years, and I loved the perspective it gave me. But as my friendships grew, so did my desire to experience church alongside the other teenagers. Worship wasn't just about sitting with my family anymore. It was also about sharing life with the friends who had become an important part of my faith journey.

Looking back, I appreciate the freedom my parents gave me. They never insisted that I remain in the front simply because they were the ministers. They understood that part of growing up in the church meant building relationships with other young people. Some Sundays I sat with my family. On other Sundays, I sat with friends. Wherever I was in the sanctuary, I never felt disconnected from worship or from my parents. Church had become home, and every seat felt familiar because the people around me had become family.

What I remember most from those years isn't where I sat. It's what I saw. Week after week, I watched ordinary people care for one another in extraordinary ways. I saw meals organized for families facing illness. I watched people gather around someone for prayer after receiving difficult news. I listened as members celebrated graduations, weddings, anniversaries, and new babies with genuine joy. When someone experienced loss, the church mourned together. When someone celebrated, everyone celebrated. Those moments taught me that church was much more than an hour of worship on Sunday morning. It was a community that shared life.

Without realizing it, I was also learning by watching my parents. After the closing prayer, while many families headed toward the parking lot, Mom and Dad often stayed long after the service had ended. They listened to stories, answered questions, prayed with people, laughed with friends, and made sure no one left feeling unnoticed. As a child, I occasionally wondered why it took us so long to leave church. As an adult, I understand those conversations were every bit as important as the sermon. Ministry didn't end with the benediction. Sometimes it truly began there in the aisle between the pews.

Those Sunday mornings shaped me more than I realized at the time. Years later, as I worked in senior living, became a social worker, and eventually found myself encouraging caregivers, I often recognized the influence of those early experiences. Caring for people rarely happens on stages. It happens in conversations before and after the main event. It happens by remembering names, noticing when someone seems quieter than usual, celebrating life's milestones, and simply being present. Those are lessons I didn't learn from a textbook. I learned them from a front pew, a middle pew, and sometimes even the back pew, watching faithful people quietly love one another week after week.

When I think back on those Sundays now, I realize the most important lesson had nothing to do with where I sat. Whether I was beside my parents in the front, with friends in the middle, or laughing with the youth group in the back, I belonged. Every seat in that sanctuary became a place where my faith was quietly taking shape. Looking back, I am grateful for all of them. They gave me different views of the same beautiful truth: the church is not defined by its pews but by the people who fill them with love, grace, and a genuine commitment to care for one another. That explains a lot.

Chapter 4

Potluck Theology

Some of my favorite memories of church didn't happen during the worship service. They happened in the fellowship hall, where the smell of homemade food greeted you before you even opened the door. If you grew up in church, you probably know exactly the kind of meal I'm talking about. Long folding tables stretched across the room, covered with casseroles, mashed potatoes, green beans, potato salad, homemade rolls, baked beans, and enough desserts to feed everyone twice. But before you reached any of those wonderful dishes, there was always one thing waiting at the very beginning of the serving line. Every single church dinner seemed to begin the same way, whether we were at Bedford First Christian Church or later at First Christian Church in Richmond. Sitting in those large aluminum pans was fried chicken, and I couldn't wait to get to it.

I absolutely loved that fried chicken. As a little boy, it was the highlight of every church potluck meal. While everyone else might have been deciding which casserole looked the best or saving room for dessert, I had already made up my mind. My eyes were on the chicken. I knew exactly where it would be, right at the beginning of the serving table, and every Sunday dinner, I looked forward to walking through that line with a plate in my hands.

There was just one problem. My parents rarely went to the fellowship hall when everyone else did.

As soon as the closing prayer was over, most of the congregation began making their way toward the fellowship hall, but my Mom and Dad stayed behind. Someone always wanted to introduce a visitor. Someone needed prayer. Someone wanted to ask a question about the sermon or spend a few minutes talking. My parents never rushed those conversations because they understood they were part of their ministry. Meanwhile, I stood there watching nearly everyone in the church go to the fellowship hall while all I could think about was the fried chicken disappearing one piece at a time.

I can still remember asking if I could go ahead without them. Almost every time, the answer was the same. They would smile and say, "Wait for us, Jeremy." Then, as if they knew exactly what I was thinking, they would remind me of the words of Jesus: "The last shall be first." I have to admit that as a young boy, I wasn't thinking very deeply about the meaning of that Scripture. I was thinking about whether there would be any fried chicken left by the time we finally made it downstairs. Waiting felt like pure torture. Every minute seemed like an eternity as I imagined the serving pans becoming emptier and emptier while I stood beside my parents greeting people.

What I didn't know was that something very special was happening downstairs.

Somewhere along the way, the people in both Bedford and Richmond figured out just how much I loved that fried chicken. I don't know who started it or whether anyone ever talked about it, but it became an unwritten tradition. Before the serving line reached the end of the chicken, someone

would quietly make sure a piece was set aside for me. By the time my parents finished greeting everyone, and we finally walked into the fellowship hall, someone would smile and say, "Don't worry, Jeremy. We saved you a piece." It happened so often that I eventually stopped worrying. Somehow, there was always a piece of chicken waiting with my name on it.

Looking back, I realize this story has very little to do with fried chicken. What those church members were really doing was taking care of a little boy. They noticed something that brought me joy, and without making a big announcement or expecting any recognition, they quietly made sure I wouldn't miss out. To them, it probably seemed like a small gesture. To me, it made me feel seen. It reminded me that I belonged. Those simple acts of kindness have stayed with me for decades because they communicated something far greater than words ever could.

As I think about those memories today, I realize they may have shaped me in ways I never recognized at the time. I have always been someone who naturally lets other people go first. Whether it's standing in line at a grocery store, waiting for food at a buffet, or holding a door open for someone else, it rarely bothers me to wait. I've often wondered if those church dinners helped teach me that lesson. Week after week, I learned that waiting didn't mean I would be forgotten. I learned to trust that there would be enough. I learned that when people genuinely care about one another, they make sure everyone has a place at the table.

Years later, as I worked in senior living, I found myself doing many of the same things for the people I served. I noticed who always looked forward to a certain dessert. I remembered which resident loved chocolate ice cream or who preferred sitting by the window during lunch. Sometimes caring for people wasn't about creating elaborate programs or planning special events. Sometimes it was as simple as remembering what made someone smile and making sure they didn't miss out. Looking back now, I realize I learned that lesson long before I ever became an Activity Director or a social worker. I learned it from ordinary church members who quietly saved a piece of fried chicken for a little preacher's kid.

When people ask me what I learned growing up in church, they probably expect stories about sermons, Bible studies, or Sunday school lessons. Those certainly played an important role in my life, but some of my greatest lessons came from much simpler moments. They came from watching people care for one another in quiet, ordinary ways that often went unnoticed by everyone else. A church potluck may not seem like a place where profound life lessons are learned, but for me, it was. Every time someone set aside a piece of fried chicken with my name on it, they were teaching me that love is often expressed through the smallest acts of kindness. Looking back, I realize that may have been one of the most important lessons I ever experienced, and it wasn't preached from a pulpit. It was lived out around a folding table in a church fellowship hall. That explains a lot.

Chapter 5

The Church That Raised Me

When I was growing up, summer always had a rhythm to it. As soon as school let out, I knew what was coming next. There would be church camp, followed not long afterward by our annual family vacation. Those two events became the highlights of every summer, and looking back, I realize they taught me far more than I understood at the time.

Church camp was something I looked forward to every year. As the school year came to an end, I could already picture myself packing my duffel bag, rolling up my sleeping bag, and getting ready for another week away from home. Something was exciting about climbing into the car, knowing I would spend several days with other kids from churches around Indiana. It wasn't a huge camp. It was just the right size to make new friends, reconnect with familiar faces from previous summers, and enjoy being part of a community that shared the same faith. Every summer felt like a reunion. I would reconnect with friends I had met the year before, and somehow, we picked up right where we had left off. We worshiped together, played games, explored the campgrounds, gathered around campfires, and laughed until a counselor reminded us it was finally time to settle down for the night. Looking back, I don't remember every Bible lesson that was taught, but I remember the friendships. I remember the laughter, the conversations, and the feeling of belonging.

One thing people often assume about being a preacher's kid is that your parents are always nearby. That wasn't the case at church camp. This was my week. Mom and Dad stayed home while I headed off on my own. Looking back, I'm grateful they gave me that opportunity. It allowed me to become more independent, build friendships of my own, and discover that I wasn't simply known as the minister's son. I was just Jeremy. Church camp also helped me realize that the Church was much bigger than Bedford First Christian Church. Until then, my world had revolved around our own congregation. Camp introduced me to young people from churches across Indiana who were asking the same questions about faith and trying to follow God just as I was. It broadened my understanding of what it meant to belong to something much larger than the church building where I worshiped every Sunday.

Almost every year, shortly after church camp ended, our family packed the car once again. This time we weren't heading to camp. We were leaving on our annual family vacation. Those vacations became just as important to me as church camp. Life in ministry was busy. My parents gave so much of themselves to caring for other people. There was always another sermon to prepare, another hospital visit to make, another meeting to attend, or another family needing encouragement. Yet every year, they intentionally made time for us. During those vacations, the church calendar paused for a few days, and we were simply a family enjoying one another. Looking back now, I realize those trips were one of the greatest gifts my parents gave us. They taught me that while serving others is important, caring for your own family is just as important.

One of those vacations led to a memory that has stayed with me for the rest of my life. When we lived in Bedford, our home was at 116 Wood Hill Drive. We literally lived on the edge of the

woods. Our backyard stretched into the forest, and our property was surrounded by more than twenty mature trees. During the spring and summer, I loved those trees. They provided shade, wildlife wandered through our yard, and it felt like we had our own little piece of nature. Every fall, however, those same trees covered the yard with what seemed like an endless blanket of leaves. Raking leaves became part of our family's yearly routine. It wasn't unusual to spend an entire Sunday afternoon filling pile after pile before finally putting the rakes away. As a kid, it wasn't exactly my favorite way to spend the day.

One weekend our family took a short getaway to Nashville, Indiana. It was just a mini vacation, but it gave us a chance to relax together before returning to another busy week. The entire weekend, though, one thought kept finding its way into my mind. I knew exactly what would be waiting for us when we got home. The yard would be covered with leaves, and after church on Sunday we would spend the afternoon raking them. As we drove home, I finally said what had been on my mind all weekend. "I don't want to go to church tomorrow."

Looking back, I realize it wasn't really church that I wanted to avoid. In my mind, going to church meant that afterward we would spend hours outside doing yard work. My parents listened and then responded with words I have never forgotten. "You don't have to go to church," they said. "You want to go to church." I remember quietly disagreeing with them for the rest of the drive. In my young mind, they simply didn't understand how much I was dreading what came after church.

When we pulled into our driveway, everything changed. The leaves were gone. The yard looked beautiful. I stood there completely confused. The enormous job I had been worrying about all weekend had disappeared. Almost instantly, I felt relief wash over me. The stress I had been carrying was gone, and I remember thinking, "Now I want to go to church."

The next day we learned what had happened. While our family had been away enjoying our mini vacation, several members of Bedford First Christian Church had quietly come to our house and raked the yard. As a child, I remember thinking it must have taken them all day. Looking back now, I realize it probably didn't. There were enough people helping that what would have taken our family an entire afternoon became an enjoyable project completed together. They weren't looking for recognition. They weren't trying to impress anyone. They simply saw a need and decided to help because they loved our family.

That weekend changed the way I looked at church. Until then, I had mostly seen my parents caring for the congregation. They preached every Sunday, visited people in the hospital, comforted grieving families, celebrated weddings, and faithfully served the church. It had never really occurred to me that the congregation was caring for us just as much. That simple act of kindness helped me understand something I would appreciate even more as an adult. The people of Bedford First Christian Church weren't simply attending worship together every Sunday. They were doing life together. They celebrated together, prayed together, laughed together, and when someone needed help, they quietly showed up. They loved our family, and we loved them.

I also realized something about myself that weekend. I wasn't going to church because I had to. I genuinely wanted to be there because those people mattered to me. They weren't simply the

people my parents served. They had become part of our extended family. Looking back now, I don't think this story is really about leaves. It's about a church that loved a young minister's family so well that a little boy couldn't imagine belonging anywhere else.

As an adult, I have reflected on that weekend many times. Some of the greatest expressions of faith are not found in grand gestures or unforgettable sermons. Sometimes they are found in ordinary people quietly serving one another without expecting recognition. A rake in someone's hands became just as powerful a lesson as any sermon I heard that year. Those men and women were teaching me what faith looked like without ever realizing they were doing it.

When I think back on those summers, I don't separate church camp, family vacations, and the people of Bedford First Christian Church. Together they taught me what community looks like. Church camp taught me that I belonged to something bigger than myself. Family vacations reminded me that healthy families need time together. The congregation showed me what it means to care for one another through simple acts of kindness. Looking back, I realize my parents weren't the only ones raising me. The people of Bedford First Christian Church helped shape my character, strengthen my faith, and show me what it means to love others. It truly was the church that raised me.

That explains a lot.

Chapter 6

The Hillsides of Honduras

As I entered my teenage years, our family had moved to Richmond, Indiana, where my parents began serving First Christian Church. Looking back now, I realize that each church I grew up in shaped my life in a different way. Bedford First Christian Church taught me what it meant to belong to a church family. It was there that I experienced people who cared for one another, carried each other's burdens, and quietly served without expecting anything in return. Richmond First Christian Church built on that foundation by expanding my view of the world. As a teenager, my world was beginning to grow beyond my neighborhood, my school, and my hometown. The people of Richmond encouraged our youth group to think beyond ourselves and to discover that following Christ meant caring not only for the people sitting beside us in church each Sunday, but also for people we had never met.

Until then, most of my life had been lived close to home. My days revolved around school, church, sports, church camp, family vacations, and spending time with friends. I knew there were people in need because I heard sermons about serving others and read stories in the Bible about compassion, but those ideas still felt distant. Richmond First Christian Church believed that faith was something to be lived, not simply studied. The adults in our congregation invested in young people. They wanted us to experience our faith firsthand. They encouraged us to step outside our comfort zones, to serve, and to discover that the Church was much bigger than one congregation in Indiana. Looking back, I don't think they realized just how much those opportunities would shape my life.

One of those opportunities came during high school when I joined a mission trip to Honduras with a group of teenagers and adults from our church, along with people from several other congregations in Indiana. At the time, I wasn't thinking about how the trip might change me. Like most teenagers, I was excited about the adventure. I looked forward to flying on an airplane, spending time with friends, and visiting another country for the first time. I thought I was simply going on an unforgettable trip. I had no idea that God was quietly preparing to reshape the way I would see people for the rest of my life.

The memory that has never left me wasn't the airplane ride or even the work we would eventually do. It was the drive into Tegucigalpa. As our bus made its way through the city, I found myself looking out the window in complete silence. The hillsides seemed to stretch forever, but what captured my attention were the homes built along them. Many were constructed from pieces of wood, sheets of metal, cardboard, and whatever other materials families could find. I had never seen anything like it. As a teenager growing up in Indiana, I had certainly heard people talk about poverty, but hearing about it and seeing it with your own eyes are two completely different experiences. I remember staring out that window, trying to make sense of what I was seeing. Families were raising children, cooking meals, going to work, laughing together, and building lives in conditions I had never imagined.

That bus ride challenged me in ways I couldn't yet explain. I wasn't comparing countries or judging the people I saw. I was simply realizing that the world was much bigger than the one I had always known. Everything I had been learning in church was suddenly becoming real. Loving your neighbor wasn't just a lesson from Sunday school. It wasn't simply something Jesus talked about in the Gospels. My neighbor included people who lived thousands of miles away, spoke a different language, and experienced life in ways I had never imagined. As I looked out the bus window, I realized that Richmond First Christian Church hadn't simply sent me to Honduras to help build a church foundation. Without knowing it, they had sent a teenager on a journey that would begin building a foundation inside of him.

As we spent time in Honduras, I noticed something else that surprised me. Even in the midst of difficult living conditions, I saw joy. I saw children playing together. I saw families caring for one another. I saw people working hard, laughing, worshiping, and living with dignity. They were not defined by what they lacked. They were people with hopes, dreams, faith, and stories just like my own. That realization quietly changed me. I stopped seeing poverty as something that defined people and began seeing people first. Circumstances could shape someone's life, but they could never determine their worth.

During our time there, our group helped build the foundation for a church. It was hard work. We carried wheelbarrows filled with dirt, shoveled gravel, mixed concrete, and spent long days working together under the hot Honduran sun. At the time, I believed we had traveled there to help the people of Honduras. Looking back now, I realize they were helping me far more than I was helping them. The people we met welcomed us with incredible kindness, generosity, and gratitude. Even though we didn't always speak the same language, smiles, laughter, handshakes, and shared work communicated everything that needed to be said. I learned that compassion doesn't require perfect communication. Sometimes simply showing up is enough.

As the years have passed, I have often thought about the adults from Richmond First Christian Church who invested in our youth group. They could have chosen easier ways to spend their time and resources, but they believed teenagers needed opportunities to see the world with their own eyes. They believed faith was something to experience, not simply something to discuss on Sunday mornings. Looking back, I realize this trip wasn't just about serving the people of Honduras. It was also about raising young people who would spend the rest of their lives seeing people differently. I was one of those young people, even though I didn't realize it at the time.

When I returned home, something happened that has stayed with me ever since. Not long after the trip, my parents took me shopping for school clothes, something we did every year before school started. Until then, I had never thought much about it. We picked out shirts, jeans, socks, and shoes before making our way to the checkout counter. As the cashier began scanning each item, I listened to the familiar sound of the register. Beep. Beep. Beep. Each sound seemed louder than the one before. Standing there, my mind wasn't in that department store anymore. It had traveled back to the hillsides of Tegucigalpa. I found myself wondering how many shirts one family could have purchased with what we were spending on mine. I thought about the children I had seen playing outside their homes and the families who welcomed us so graciously. For the first time in my life, I became aware of something I had never really considered. I hadn't earned

the circumstances I had been born into any more than those children had chosen theirs. The difference wasn't worth. The difference was opportunity.

I have never forgotten the sound of that cash register because it represented a moment when my perspective changed forever. What I felt wasn't guilt. It was awareness. I realized that every person deserves to be treated with dignity and respect, regardless of where they live, how much money they have, or what circumstances they face. That lesson became part of who I was becoming, even though I couldn't have explained it at the time. Looking back now, I see that God was slowly teaching me to notice people before noticing their circumstances.

The mission trip to Honduras quietly influenced nearly every chapter of my adult life. It helps explain why I have always been drawn toward people who are often overlooked. It explains why I spent my career working with older adults, why I became a social worker, why I have always enjoyed listening to people's stories, whether in a senior living community or while driving an Uber, and why I have continued looking for ways to encourage people who spend their lives caring for others. Somewhere along the way, I stopped focusing on what people had and became much more interested in who they were. Every person has a story worth hearing because every person has value.

Looking back now, I can see that Richmond First Christian Church gave me one of the greatest gifts a church can give a teenager. They expanded my world. They helped me understand that faith is much bigger than Sunday mornings and that following Christ means paying attention to people who are often overlooked, whether they live next door or on another continent. Honduras opened my eyes, but Richmond made the trip possible. That congregation believed enough in its young people to let us experience the world, and in doing so, they quietly shaped the direction of my life.

When people ask why caring for others has become such an important part of who I am, my thoughts often return to that bus ride through the hillsides of Tegucigalpa. I thought I was traveling to Honduras to help build the foundation of a church. Looking back now, I realize that while we were filling wheelbarrows with dirt and laying concrete, God was quietly laying the foundation for my own calling. The compassion I have carried into senior living, social work, mental health, conversations with Uber passengers, and every other chapter of my life can be traced back to that teenage boy looking out the window of a bus and realizing for the first time that God's family is much bigger than he had ever imagined. Richmond First Christian Church gave me the opportunity to see the world differently, and Honduras taught me to see every person as someone created with dignity, worth, and a story that matters. That explains a lot.

Chapter 7

The Church Was My Neighborhood

When people ask me where I grew up, I usually tell them Bedford and later Richmond, Indiana. That's true, but it never feels like the complete answer. Looking back, I realize I grew up in churches just as much as I grew up in houses. While other kids spent afternoons hanging around neighborhood parks or riding their bikes from one friend's house to another, my neighborhood often looked like church hallways, fellowship halls, classrooms, and sanctuaries. The church wasn't simply a place we visited on Sunday morning. It was woven into the rhythm of everyday life.

Some of my earliest memories are of wandering through empty church hallways while my mom and dad finished meetings or prepared for the week ahead. I knew which classrooms had the comfortable chairs, where the light switches were, and which doors squeaked when they opened. I remember the smell of old hymnals, freshly brewed coffee before Sunday school, and casseroles warming in the fellowship hall kitchen. Every room seemed to hold a story, and every hallway eventually led to someone who knew my name.

As a child, I never thought it was unusual that so many adults knew me. They asked how school was going, remembered my birthday, and wanted to know what sports I was playing or what activities I enjoyed. If I was having a good day, they celebrated with me. If I looked disappointed, someone always seemed to notice. They weren't doing it because I was the preacher's kid. They did it because that's what church families often do. Looking back, I realize I was surrounded by people who paid attention to others, and without realizing it, I was learning to do the same.

One of the greatest gifts of growing up in church was that I became comfortable talking with people of every age. I wasn't only around children my own age. I spent time with older adults, young families, teenagers, grandparents, and people whose lives looked very different from mine. I listened to conversations that stretched across generations. I heard stories about military service, raising children, losing loved ones, starting new jobs, and trusting God through difficult seasons. At the time, I probably wasn't paying close attention to every word, but those conversations quietly shaped the way I began to see people.

Looking back, I think that's one reason I have always felt comfortable sitting down with someone I have just met. Growing up, that was simply normal. Every Sunday brought someone new to meet and another story to hear. I learned early that everyone has something worth sharing if someone is willing to listen.

The church also taught me that ministry often happened in ordinary moments. It wasn't limited to sermons on Sunday morning. It happened while stacking chairs after a fellowship dinner, laughing together while washing dishes in the kitchen, visiting someone in the hospital, or standing in the parking lot talking long after worship had ended. Those moments weren't listed in the church bulletin, but they were often where people cared for one another the most.

As a child, I didn't realize I was receiving an education in relationships. No one handed me a textbook or explained what they were teaching. Instead, I watched people show up for one another. I watched them celebrate births, comfort grieving families, prepare meals for neighbors, and quietly lend a hand whenever someone needed help. Service wasn't something the church talked about. It was simply what people did.

When I look at my life today, I can see those lessons everywhere. Much of my career has centered on helping people feel seen, heard, and connected. Whether I was planning activities for older adults, sitting with families as a social worker, or creating communities where caregivers can encourage one another, I have found myself returning to the same simple truth I learned as a child. People need people. They need someone who notices them, listens to them, and reminds them they matter.

I didn't realize it then, but the church had become my neighborhood, and the people inside it became my teachers. They also became my caregivers. More about this later. They taught me that caring isn't always dramatic. More often, it looks like remembering someone's name, asking how they're doing, pulling up a chair beside them, or simply being present. Those ordinary moments became extraordinary lessons that have followed me throughout my life. Looking back, I understand why building communities has always felt so natural to me. I spent my childhood living in one. And that explains a lot.

Chapter 8

Growing Up With Older Friends

One of the greatest gifts of growing up as a preacher's kid was that I never thought of church as a place filled only with adults. It was filled with people who became part of my life. Some were young parents raising children of their own. Some were grandparents. Some were retired. Some worked in factories, taught school, farmed, owned businesses, or served in countless other occupations. Every Sunday they gathered together to worship, and without realizing it, they became part of the village that helped raise me. Looking back now, I realize I learned as much from watching those people live their lives as I did from listening to sermons. They became examples of what faith looked like when it was lived out day after day.

When I think about Bedford First Christian Church, one of the first people who comes to mind is my Sunday school teacher. I wish I could tell you every Bible story she taught or every craft we made together, but that isn't what has stayed with me all these years. What I remember most is how she made me feel. Every Sunday she greeted me with a smile that made it seem like she was genuinely happy to see me. She knew my name. She asked about school. She listened to my stories, even though they were probably the rambling stories that little boys often tell. She encouraged my questions and made church feel like a place where I belonged. Looking back now, I realize she was doing much more than filling an hour before worship. She was helping shape my understanding of God by the way she treated me. She probably never imagined that decades later I would still be thinking about her, but I do. Whenever I picture that classroom, one word comes to mind: safe. It was a place where I could learn, laugh, ask questions, and simply be a kid surrounded by adults who cared.

Years later, after our family moved to Richmond, another adult became just as important to me in a different season of life. His name was Jim, and he led our youth group. If my Sunday school teacher helped shape my childhood, Jim helped shape my teenage years. Teenagers need adults who genuinely enjoy being around them, and Jim was one of those people. He never made us feel like we were simply children waiting to become adults. He treated us as though our opinions mattered. He laughed with us, challenged us, listened to us, and created opportunities for us to grow together. Looking back now, I realize how much work that probably required. Teenagers do not automatically become close friends. Someone has to create the environment where friendships can develop. Jim did that week after week. Through youth group meetings, service projects, retreats, mission trips, and countless ordinary evenings together, he helped create a place where we felt connected to one another and to our church.

As I think back over my years in Bedford and Richmond, I realize there were so many other adults who quietly invested in my life. Some of their names I still remember clearly. Others have faded with time. For a while that bothered me. I wished I could remember every name so I could thank every person who encouraged me along the way. Then I realized something important. Even though I can't remember every name, I have never forgotten the feeling those people gave me. I remember feeling welcomed. I remember feeling noticed. I remember feeling encouraged.

Most of all, I remember feeling safe. That feeling has stayed with me far longer than many of their names ever could.

When I close my eyes and think about Bedford and Richmond, that word keeps coming back to me. Safe. Church was a place where adults looked out for children. It was a place where people noticed if you were absent. It was a place where someone always asked how school was going, remembered your birthday, or congratulated you after a school concert or basketball game. It was a place where I knew people were praying for my family. Looking back now, I realize not every child grows up with that kind of community. I did, and I will never take that gift for granted.

Growing up in church also meant I spent a great deal of time with older adults. As a child, I genuinely enjoyed talking with them. They always had stories to tell. They talked about growing up during different times, serving in the military, raising families, working hard, overcoming difficulties, and remaining faithful through every season of life. I didn't always understand everything they shared, but I loved listening. They never made me feel like I was interrupting their conversations. Instead, they welcomed me in. They made room for children. Looking back, I realize they were teaching me one of the greatest lessons of all. Every person has a story worth hearing if we are willing to slow down long enough to listen.

There is something that makes me smile today when I think about those years. As a child, I remember thinking so many people in our congregation were old. As I write this book today, I realize many of them were probably close to the age I am now. My childhood perspective made everyone seem much older than they really were. Today I smile because I understand they weren't old at all. They were simply adults faithfully living their lives, raising families, serving their church, working hard, and growing older one year at a time, just as I am now. Time has a funny way of changing our perspective.

As the years passed, I began noticing things that many children don't experience until much later in life. I watched people grow older. I watched health slowly change. I watched people who had once walked confidently into church begin using canes, then walkers, then wheelchairs. Eventually, I noticed empty pews where familiar faces had once sat. As a child, I didn't fully understand everything that was happening, but I noticed. I noticed when someone wasn't there. I noticed when prayer requests became more frequent. I noticed how quickly people from the church surrounded families going through difficult times. Even before I understood the realities of aging, illness, and grief, I was watching compassion lived out every single week.

Because both of my parents were ministers, grief was never hidden from our family. Aaron, Kara, and I were not protected from the reality that people experience loss. My parents shared enough for us to understand when someone in the congregation was hurting or when a family needed prayer. Looking back, I appreciate the way they handled those conversations. They never overwhelmed us with details, but they also never pretended that pain didn't exist. They helped us understand that grief is a natural part of loving people and that one of the greatest gifts we can offer another person is simply our presence.

Funerals became part of the rhythm of our family's life. While many children attended only a handful of funerals growing up, I attended many more. At the time, it simply felt normal because

it was part of being a preacher's kid. I watched my parents comfort grieving families, listen to stories about lives well lived, and remind people they were not alone. They never rushed those moments. They understood that grief cannot be hurried. Without realizing it, they were teaching me that ministry often has very little to do with having the perfect words. Sometimes caring for people simply means showing up, listening, and staying beside them through difficult moments.

Looking back now, I realize that all of these adults were teaching me at the same time. My Sunday school teacher taught me that children deserve patience, kindness, and encouragement. Jim taught me that teenagers need adults who believe in them and create spaces where friendships can flourish. The older members of the congregation taught me the value of listening to people's stories and honoring the wisdom that comes with age. My parents taught me what compassion looks like during life's hardest moments. Countless other adults, whose names I may never remember, taught me what it feels like to belong to a community where everyone watches over one another. None of them probably realized they were shaping my future, but together they quietly formed the person I would become.

Years later, when I walked into my first senior living community as an Activities Director, something immediately felt familiar. I wasn't intimidated by being surrounded by older adults because I had spent my entire childhood surrounded by them. Sitting down to listen to someone's life story felt natural because I had been doing that since I was a little boy in church. I understood that every older adult had lived a remarkable life, whether anyone had taken the time to ask about it or not. The conversations I had with residents reminded me of the conversations I used to have after church with the older members of Bedford and Richmond. In many ways, my work never felt like stepping into something completely new. It felt like coming home.

As the years passed, I found myself becoming more interested in people's stories than in their diagnoses. I loved hearing about first jobs, military service, marriages, children, grandchildren, favorite vacations, difficult seasons, and moments that shaped their lives. Every wrinkle represented another chapter. Every photograph held another memory. Every conversation reminded me that people never stop being people simply because they grow older. I don't think I learned that lesson in college. I think I learned it while sitting beside older friends in church long before I ever earned a degree in social work.

Today, when I sit beside an older adult in an assisted living community, spend time with someone living with dementia, or comfort a caregiver who is grieving the gradual loss of someone they love, those moments don't feel unfamiliar. They remind me of home. They remind me of Bedford and Richmond. They remind me of the adults who smiled when they saw me walking down the hallway, who shook my hand after worship, who asked about school, who celebrated my accomplishments, who prayed for my family, and who quietly demonstrated what a faithful life looked like. They remind me that relationships are built through countless small moments that often seem ordinary at the time.

As I grow older myself, I find that I think about those adults more often than I used to. Many of them have now passed away. Some I can still picture as clearly as if I had seen them yesterday. Others have become faint memories whose names have slowly disappeared with time. Yet none of that changes the impact they had on my life. They may never have realized they were helping

shape a young preacher's kid. They were simply teaching a Sunday school class, leading a youth group, greeting children in the hallway, asking about school, praying for families, or taking a few minutes to have a conversation after worship. What seemed ordinary to them became extraordinary to me.

Looking back now, I realize my parents were never raising Aaron, Kara, and me by themselves. They had help. They were surrounded by a church family that believed children mattered. My Sunday school teacher believed I mattered. Jim believed teenagers mattered. The older adults who asked about my week believed I mattered. The countless people who smiled when I walked into church, remembered my birthday, encouraged me after a basketball game, celebrated life's joys, and stood beside our family during difficult moments all became part of the story God was writing in my life. I don't remember every sermon. I don't remember every Sunday school lesson. I don't remember every person's name. What I do remember is how those people made me feel. They made church feel like home. They made faith feel real. Most of all, they made me feel safe, known, and loved.

When people ask why I have spent more than twenty-five years caring for older adults and walking alongside families during some of life's most difficult seasons, I don't have to think very long. Long before I earned a degree in social work or accepted my first job in senior living, I was surrounded by faithful adults who quietly showed me what caring for people looks like. They taught me that every person has a story worth hearing, every generation has something to offer, and every life deserves to be honored. They may never have imagined the impact they were having on a young preacher's kid, but I carry their influence with me every day. Looking back now, I realize I wasn't simply growing up in a church. I was growing up with older friends who helped shape the rest of my life. That explains a lot.

Chapter 9

Finding My Place

Moving to a new town is never easy, especially when you're entering middle school. Looking back, I think eighth grade may have been one of the most awkward seasons of life. Everyone is trying to figure out who they are while hoping they fit in somewhere. Friend groups have already been established, classmates have known one another for years, and being the new kid can feel overwhelming. That was my reality when our family moved to Richmond, Indiana.

Moving was something I had experienced before as a preacher's kid, but that didn't make it easy. Every move meant leaving behind friends, familiar routines, and a church family that had become part of my life. Walking into a new school where everyone already knew each other was intimidating enough, but there was another layer to my experience. Before many people knew me as Jeremy, they knew me as "the preacher's kid."

Thankfully, I didn't have to wonder where I belonged for very long.

I found my place at First Christian Church in Richmond.

From the very beginning, the youth group welcomed me in a way I will never forget. They didn't see me as the preacher's kid. They saw me as Jeremy. At a time when every teenager wants to know they belong somewhere, they made room for me without hesitation. They introduced me to their friends, included me in everything, and before long, I felt like I had always been part of the group.

When I think about those years, so many faces come to mind. Becky, Apryl, Sarah, Mike, John, Jen, Matt, Jenny, Amiee, the Mussoni brothers, the Stolle sisters, and so many others became part of my story. We have all gone different directions in life, but whenever I think about Richmond, I think about them first.

Our youth group became much more than a weekly church activity. It became our second family. We grew up together. We laughed together, worshiped together, traveled together, served together, and created memories that still make me smile decades later.

Some of those memories happened right in the sanctuary. My friends and I often sat together in the back pew. I suspect that was after we had spent enough Sundays sitting closer to the front and got in trouble for talking a little too much or not paying close enough attention. Sitting in the back was probably everyone's solution. We did our best to whisper, but I'm sure the adults around us heard every giggle and every conversation. Looking back now, I smile because they always seemed to give us grace. They let kids be kids. I often wonder what my mom and dad were thinking while they were leading worship or preaching.

Some of my favorite memories happened in the church kitchen. In middle school, my parents led us through the adventure of making homemade taffy. I can still remember the smell of the hot

sugar filling the room as we stretched and pulled it until it turned into candy. We gathered again to make homemade fudge that we sold to help pay for our mission trips. Looking back, I realize we weren't just making candy. We were building friendships while working side by side.

There always seemed to be another adventure waiting for us. We loved Winterfest at Kings Island, retreats at Quaker Haven, church camp, and youth meetings that somehow always ended at Taco Bell. Those late-night Taco Bell conversations became almost as important as the youth meetings themselves. We solved the world's problems over tacos and laughed until it was time to head home.

The lock-ins were legendary. We played Sardines, Ditch 'Em, Spoons, and just about every game imaginable. Yet my favorite memories came after the games ended. Eventually, everyone would gather somewhere in the church, and one place I remember especially well was the staircase leading to the choir loft. Those stairs became our meeting place. We talked about school, friendships, faith, family, and our dreams for the future. Looking back, I realize those conversations shaped me just as much as any sermon I ever heard.

We loved traveling together. In fact, we loved being together so much that we hated when the adults tried to separate the boys and girls at night. Somehow, we always managed to find ourselves together again, usually waiting for our youth leader, Jim, to fall asleep. Thankfully for us, that never seemed to take very long. The late-night conversations that followed are still some of my favorite memories. We experienced so much together that, by the time we returned home from a trip, we usually needed a couple of weeks apart before we were ready to see one another again.

Our mission trips changed us. We traveled to Homestead, Florida, after Hurricane Andrew, served in Honduras, and spent countless hours putting together church cookbooks to raise money so we could continue serving wherever God called us. One of the most memorable trips was New York City. We saw *The Will Rogers Follies* on Broadway, attended a dance performance at Juilliard, and created memories that still make me laugh. I still remember Sarah opening a door marked "Not an Exit" only to discover a room full of slot machines. I also remember Brandon confidently ordering an incredibly spicy meal at an Indian restaurant before desperately reaching for water after only a few bites.

As wonderful as those memories are, the part of New York that has stayed with me the most was serving with **God's Love We Deliver**. We prepared and delivered meals to people living with AIDS who were homebound. As I was writing this chapter, my friend John reminded me of something I had almost forgotten. Some of the meals were delivered to beautiful Fifth Avenue apartments. Others were delivered to SROs, single room occupancy buildings where people lived in the smallest spaces the city allowed, sharing bathrooms and kitchens down the hallway. John's observation was simple but profound. AIDS was affecting everyone. It didn't matter whether someone lived in luxury or had almost nothing. Every person deserves compassion.

The moment John shared that memory, it came rushing back to me. I can still picture us walking through New York carrying meals from one building to another. We weren't simply delivering food. We were reminding people they had not been forgotten. Of everything we experienced in

New York City, those quiet walks remain some of my clearest memories. Looking back now, I realize God was teaching me something that would shape the rest of my life. Every person deserves dignity. Every person deserves compassion. Every person matters.

One of the greatest gifts from those years is that they never really ended. Even today, many of us still stay connected. Most of the time, it's through instant messages. Someone remembers a funny story, someone else fills in another detail, and suddenly we're teenagers again, laughing about things that happened more than thirty years ago. As I've written this book, those conversations have become even more meaningful. Memories I thought were gone forever have come back because someone else remembered another piece of the story.

I love that.

I'm perfectly okay with remembering together because those conversations remind me not only of where we've been but also of who we became because of those experiences. The memories belong to all of us, and together they paint a fuller picture than any one of us could remember alone.

Looking back now, I realize my youth group gave me far more than wonderful memories. They gave me confidence. They gave me lifelong friendships. They gave me a place where I belonged when I needed it most. More importantly, they taught me that one invitation, one act of kindness, and one welcoming community can change someone's life forever.

Years later, when I was working in senior living, I found myself trying to recreate what those friends gave me. I wanted people to feel seen. I wanted them to know they belonged. I wanted them to experience the same acceptance that I found in a church youth group in Richmond, Indiana.

Looking back now, I realize they weren't simply giving me a place to belong. They were helping shape the person I would become. That explains a lot.

Chapter 10

I Almost Went Home

Arriving at Bethany College was one of the first times in my life that I wasn't immediately introduced as "the preacher's kid." Growing up in Bedford and Richmond, that title naturally followed me everywhere I went. People knew my parents long before they knew me. Church members had watched me grow up, celebrated birthdays with our family, and encouraged me through every stage of childhood. Some expectations came with being the minister's son, but there was also a great deal of love. It wasn't a burden. It was simply the life I had always known.

As my senior year of high school came to an end, I began sharing with people that I would be attending Bethany College in West Virginia. I still remember how excited members of First Christian Church in Richmond were when they heard the news. Bethany College has deep roots within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), and many people in our congregation immediately recognized the connection. They knew its history. Some had attended Bethany themselves. Others had family members who had gone there. Many simply knew it as a place that had educated generations of leaders within our denomination. Every time I mentioned Bethany, I was met with words of encouragement. They weren't just happy that I was going to college. They were excited about where I was going.

Looking back now, I realize my church family wasn't simply sending me off to college. They were sending one of their own. They had watched me grow from a little boy in Sunday school into a young man preparing to begin a new chapter of life. Their encouragement gave me confidence. It made me believe I was ready for what came next, even though deep inside I wasn't completely sure.

When I finally arrived on campus, everything changed.

For the first time in my life, I was surrounded by people who knew absolutely nothing about me. No one knew my parents. No one knew the churches where I had grown up. No one knew my story. I wasn't introduced as Jeremy, the preacher's son. I was simply Jeremy, another freshman carrying too many boxes into a residence hall while quietly wondering if I had made the right decision.

At first, that freedom felt uncomfortable.

I missed home almost immediately. I missed my parents. I missed the familiarity of Richmond. I missed seeing people who had known me my entire life. The campus was beautiful, but it didn't feel like home. The faces were unfamiliar. The routines were different. Everyone else seemed to know exactly what they were doing while I was trying to figure out where my next class was located.

There were moments during those first few days when I seriously considered packing everything back into my car and driving home to Indiana. I honestly wondered if I belonged there. It would

have been so much easier to return to everything that was familiar than to continue feeling uncertain.

But instead of leaving, I stayed.

Looking back now, that may have been one of the most important decisions of my life.

Little by little, things began to change. A conversation before class turned into lunch together. Someone invited me to hang out in the student center. Another student introduced me to a group of friends. Before long, I realized I wasn't the only one struggling with homesickness. Almost every freshman was trying to figure out where they belonged. We were all carrying the same questions. We simply hid them in different ways.

One of the things that immediately made Bethany feel more comfortable was its connection to the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). I quickly met other students whose parents were ministers. For the first time in my life, being a preacher's kid didn't make me different. It became something we had in common. We understood what it was like to spend summers at church camp, help with Vacation Bible School, attend committee dinners, and watch our parents devote countless hours to ministry. We understood that Sundays looked different for us than they did for many of our friends growing up. There was an unspoken understanding between us that immediately made campus feel a little more like home.

As the weeks passed, something else happened that would become one of the greatest gifts of my college years. I discovered the importance of community.

Looking back now, I believe that may be one of the greatest lessons Bethany College ever taught me. Yes, I learned theories of social work, completed research papers, and prepared for a career. Those things were important, and I remain deeply grateful for the education I received. Bethany challenged me academically and prepared me professionally. The professors expected us to think critically, ask questions, and grow. They helped shape me into a social worker, but they also helped shape me into a more thoughtful and well-rounded person.

Yet some of my most important experiences never happened inside a classroom. It happened through friendships. We studied together. We laughed together. We stayed up far too late talking about life. We celebrated birthdays, survived finals week, attended campus events, played intramural sports, and spent countless evenings simply enjoying one another's company. We went to parties, explored new places, and learned what it meant to live independently. Those experiences weren't about leaving behind the values I had learned in Bedford and Richmond. They were about discovering who I was outside the walls of the churches that had raised me.

For the first time, people were getting to know me because of who I was, not because of who my parents were. They learned about Jeremy through conversations, shared experiences, and genuine friendships. That was freeing. It helped me understand that while growing up as a preacher's kid would always be part of my story, it did not have to define every relationship I would ever have.

The friendships I formed at Bethany became one of the greatest blessings of my life. Decades have now passed since graduation, yet many of those friendships remain strong. We have watched one another begin careers, get married, raise children, experience loss, celebrate milestones, and navigate the unexpected turns that life inevitably brings. We don't talk every day, but there is something special about friendships formed during a season when everyone is discovering who they are becoming. Those friends have continued cheering me on throughout every chapter of my journey, just as I have tried to encourage them through theirs.

Looking back, I realize Bethany expanded my understanding of community. Bedford had taught me what it meant to belong to a church family. Richmond had shown me the power of youth group friendships. Bethany taught me that community isn't limited to one place. It travels with you through life. It is built whenever people choose to care for one another, encourage one another, and remain connected even as life carries them in different directions.

One of those friendships eventually became something even more meaningful. I married one of my Bethany friends.

When I arrived on campus as a nervous freshman who was thinking about driving home, I had no idea I would someday meet the woman who would become my wife. If someone had told me during those first difficult days that I would not only earn a degree but also meet my future wife, I probably wouldn't have believed them. Looking back now, it amazes me to think that one decision to stay at Bethany instead of returning home changed the entire direction of my life.

One of my favorite parts about attending Bethany was coming home during breaks. Every time I returned to Richmond, members of the church wanted to hear how college was going. They asked about my classes, my professors, my roommates, and the friends I had made. I loved telling them that I was doing well. Their interest reminded me that I had never stopped belonging to them. Even though I had left for college, my church family continued celebrating each new chapter of my life. They prayed for me, encouraged me, and reminded me that no matter where life took me, I would always have a home waiting for me.

Today, as I look back on my years at Bethany, I feel tremendous gratitude. I am grateful for an outstanding education that prepared me for a career in social work. I am grateful for professors who challenged me to think differently. I am grateful for experiences that helped me grow beyond what I thought was possible. Most of all, I am grateful for the people. If someone were to ask me what I treasure most about Bethany College, I would answer without hesitation. It is the friendships. Degrees prepare you for a career. Friendships help prepare you for life.

Looking back now, I realize Bethany College became the bridge between my childhood and the rest of my journey. Until then, nearly every chapter of my life had centered around Bedford and Richmond. After graduation, entirely new chapters began to unfold. I accepted my first professional position and moved to Indianapolis. Later, my career took me to Pittsburgh, where I continued growing both personally and professionally. Somewhere along that journey, I married Amy, one of my Bethany friends, and together we eventually moved to the Philadelphia area. Years later, another unexpected chapter led us to Groveland, Florida, where my journey with God was rekindled in ways I never could have imagined. Those stories are still ahead, but when I

look back now, I can see they all began because I chose to stay when everything inside me wanted to go home.

Sometimes I smile when I think about that homesick freshman carrying boxes into a residence hall. He couldn't see what God was quietly preparing. He couldn't see the lifelong friendships waiting to be formed. He couldn't see the education that would launch his career. He couldn't see the woman he would marry, the cities he would call home, the people whose lives would intersect with his, or the ministry that would eventually grow from decades of caring for others. All he could see was how much he missed home. I'm grateful I stayed.

Bethany College didn't pull me away from Bedford and Richmond. It built upon everything those two churches had already given me. Bedford taught me faith. Richmond taught me belonging. Bethany taught me how to carry those gifts into a much larger world. It showed me that community can be found wherever people intentionally care for one another. It reminded me that some of life's greatest blessings begin just beyond the point where we are most tempted to give up.

Looking back now, I realize that Bethany didn't simply prepare me for my first job. It prepared me for the rest of my life. It became the place where childhood ended, adulthood began, and a new journey unfolded that would eventually take me far beyond Indiana while never allowing me to forget where I came from. That explains a lot.

Chapter 11

Discovering My Calling

As I made my way through college at Bethany, people often asked the same question every student eventually hears. "What are you going to do after graduation?" At first, I wasn't entirely sure. I knew I enjoyed being around people. I enjoyed listening to their stories and helping them through difficult seasons of life. Growing up as a preacher's kid, that simply felt normal. Caring for people wasn't something my parents talked about as much as it was something they lived. Looking back, I realize my calling had been taking shape long before I ever chose a college major.

Choosing social work seemed like the natural path. My classes taught me about human behavior, relationships, grief, advocacy, and meeting people where they were. As I sat through lectures and completed assignments, I found myself thinking about my parents. Much of what I was learning in the classroom had already been modeled for me at home. My parents may not have used social work terminology, but they practiced those principles every day through ministry. They listened before they spoke, treated people with dignity, and understood that caring for someone often meant simply walking beside them.

It wasn't until later that I realized something else. My mother had earned her undergraduate degree in social work before becoming a minister. As a child, I never gave much thought to what she had studied in college. She was simply Mom. Looking back now, I can clearly see how her education and her heart for people influenced me. She had a remarkable ability to listen without judging, to understand what people were feeling, and to gently help them find hope during difficult times. Those qualities became part of the way I learned to care for others.

My father took a different path. He majored in music before entering ministry. Once again, it wasn't something I appreciated as a child. Looking back, however, I can see how music shaped the way he connected with people. Music has a way of reaching places that words sometimes cannot. Whether it was leading worship, playing the piano, singing, or helping create meaningful moments during church services, my father understood that creativity could touch people's hearts in powerful ways. Without realizing it, I was learning that caring for people isn't only about listening. Sometimes it is about creating experiences that inspire, encourage, and bring people together.

Those two influences came together during my senior internship in Wheeling, West Virginia. My internship was divided between two very different settings. Part of my time was spent at a hospital working alongside social workers who specialized in discharge planning. Every day, I watched them help patients and families navigate difficult decisions. Some people were returning home, while others needed rehabilitation or long-term care. Families often felt overwhelmed by uncertainty, and I watched the social workers calmly guide them through one of the most stressful times in their lives. They listened carefully, answered questions honestly, and helped people prepare for what came next. I appreciated every moment I spent there because I could see the difference compassionate social work made in people's lives.

The other half of my internship was spent at a nursing home, where I followed the Activity Director. At first, I assumed I would observe recreational programs. Instead, I discovered a profession that completely captured my heart. I watched residents laugh together, make new friendships, rediscover old memories through music, and find purpose in activities designed just for them. I quickly realized that activities were never about keeping people busy. They were about helping people continue living meaningful lives.

What surprised me most was how creative the work was. Every day required new ideas. One day, the Activity Director was transforming a room for a holiday celebration. The next day, she was adapting a game so everyone could participate regardless of their physical abilities. Programs had to be engaging, meaningful, and flexible because every resident was different. It wasn't enough to follow a calendar. You had to imagine experiences that would bring people together and help them smile.

Something inside me came alive.

I loved the creativity. I loved thinking of new ideas. I loved watching people who had been sitting quietly begin laughing together because someone had taken the time to create an experience just for them. I began to understand that creativity wasn't simply about arts and crafts or decorations. Creativity was another way of caring for people. It was finding new ways to help someone feel connected, valued, and joyful.

Looking back now, I realize my creativity didn't begin during that internship. It had been developing throughout my childhood. Churches are wonderfully creative places. I grew up watching classrooms transformed for Vacation Bible School, sanctuaries decorated for Christmas Eve services, fellowship halls prepared for dinners, youth retreats carefully planned, church camps organized, and special events created to bring people together. Week after week, I watched people use imagination to build community. I never realized I was learning from them, but I was. My experiences in both the Bedford and Richmond congregations were important to my creative ability that I needed to have for the next 25 years as an Activity Director.

It was during that internship that everything finally came together for me. I realized I didn't have to choose between the influences of my mom and dad. My mother's background in social work had taught me how to understand people. My father's love of music had shown me the power of creativity to bring people together. My career allowed me to combine both. I could care for people with compassion while creating experiences that filled their lives with joy, laughter, music, friendship, and purpose.

Although my degree is in social work, most of my career has been spent in activities within senior living communities. Some people have wondered why I chose that path. Looking back, the answer seems obvious. Activities allowed me to blend everything I had been learning since childhood. They brought together relationships, compassion, creativity, music, celebration, and community. Every day became an opportunity to help someone feel seen, included, and alive.

As I reflect on my internship in Wheeling today, I realize it didn't change who I was. It revealed who I had been becoming all along. The lessons I learned from my parents, the churches where I

grew up, and the people who invested in me finally came together. I had inherited my mother's heart for understanding people and my father's gift for using creativity to encourage them. Those two influences became the foundation of my career and continue to shape the way I care for others today. Looking back, I realize that growing up as a preacher's kid prepared me for this long before I ever knew it. That explains a lot.

Chapter 12

Listen, Buddy

When I accepted my first position in senior living, I thought I was ready. I had earned my degree in social work, completed my internship in Wheeling, West Virginia, and learned from experienced professionals in both a hospital and a nursing home. I understood assessments, care plans, discharge planning, and the importance of helping families navigate difficult decisions. I was excited to begin my career helping older adults, and like many new graduates, I probably carried a little more confidence than experience. I believed I had spent four years preparing to care for people. What I didn't realize was that my greatest education was about to begin, and it wouldn't come from a textbook or a professor. It would come from the very people I thought I was there to help.

One of the first residents who changed my life was a woman in her late nineties who spent most of her days in bed. I walked into her room one day feeling confident as a brand-new social worker. I introduced myself and began talking with her while standing beside her bed. I was talking to her about the benefits of getting out of bed and socializing. Before I knew what was happening, she reached up, grabbed my tie, pulled me down until we were face to face, looked directly into my eyes, and said, "Listen, buddy, you don't know everything." For a brief moment, I didn't know whether to laugh, apologize, or simply stand there in surprise. This moment has a great impact in how I live my life today. I left her room that day thinking about those words, and the more I reflected on them, the more I realized she was absolutely right.

Over the next two years, I had the privilege of getting to know her and her family. She became much more than another resident on my caseload. She became one of my greatest teachers. She taught me that caring for people isn't about proving how much you know. It isn't about having the perfect answer or always knowing what to say. Caring begins with humility. It begins by slowing down, listening carefully, making eye contact, and recognizing that every person still has something valuable to teach us, regardless of their age or diagnosis. She changed the way I approached every resident who came after her.

Instead of assuming I understood someone's story, I learned to ask questions. Instead of rushing through conversations because I had another task waiting, I learned to slow down and be present. Instead of focusing on completing my responsibilities, I began focusing on the person sitting in front of me. Every resident had lived a life filled with experiences I could never fully understand unless I took the time to listen. Some had raised families during difficult times. Others had served in the military, built businesses, taught children, worked on farms, or overcome hardships I had never experienced. Their bodies had aged, but their wisdom remained. I realized that every conversation was an opportunity to learn something if I was willing to listen.

As I spent more time in senior living, I also began to understand that activities were never really about bingo, crafts, or entertainment. Those were simply the vehicles that brought people together. The real purpose was much deeper. Activities created opportunities for friendships to form, memories to surface, laughter to return, and purpose to continue. They reminded people

that they still had gifts to share and stories worth telling. Some of the most meaningful moments happened before a program officially started or after everyone else had left the room, when a resident simply wanted someone to sit and talk for a few extra minutes.

The more I listened to residents, the more creative I became. Creativity wasn't about planning elaborate events for the sake of keeping people busy. It was about knowing people well enough to create experiences that mattered to them. If someone had spent their life gardening, a planting activity became much more than putting flowers in a pot. It became an opportunity to remember the garden they had cared for at home. If someone loved music, a sing-along became a doorway to memories of dances, weddings, church choirs, and family gatherings. A trivia game wasn't about finding the right answer. It was about giving someone the chance to say, "I remember that." The better I knew the residents, the better I could create experiences that honored the lives they had lived.

Looking back now, I realize I had been preparing for this work my entire life. Growing up as a preacher's kid, I watched my parents invest in people every day. My mother, with her background in social work, taught me the importance of listening, understanding, and meeting people where they were. My father, whose college major was music, showed me how creativity could bring people together, inspire hope, and touch hearts in ways words alone sometimes could not. I didn't recognize those influences as a child, but they quietly became part of who I was. My internship in Wheeling showed me that social work and activities were not separate paths. They complemented one another. One focused on understanding people, and the other focused on enriching their lives. My career allowed me to bring those two influences together every single day.

When I think about that resident who grabbed my tie all those years ago, I realize she gave me one of the greatest lessons of my career. Degrees are important. Education matters. Experience is valuable. But none of those things replace humility. Every person we meet knows something we don't know. Every person carries a story we haven't heard. Every person has the potential to teach us if we are willing to listen. More than twenty-five years later, I still hear her words whenever I meet someone new. "Listen, buddy, you don't know everything." She was right then, and she is still right today.

I entered senior living believing I was there to teach, encourage, and help older adults. What I discovered instead was that they were shaping me every bit as much as I was serving them. They taught me patience, resilience, gratitude, humor, compassion, and the importance of seeing the person before the diagnosis. They helped me become a better social worker, a better Activity Director, and a better human being. Looking back, I realize that one unexpected conversation with a resident became one of the defining moments of my life. That explains a lot.

Chapter 13

More Than Just Bingo

One of the biggest misconceptions about working in senior living is that activities are simply about keeping residents busy. Over the years, I can't tell you how many times someone has smiled and said, "Oh, you play bingo all day." I usually smile back because I understand why people think that. If you only walked into a community during an afternoon game, you might assume that's all there was to it. But the longer I worked with older adults, the more I realized that activities had very little to do with filling time and everything to do with helping people continue living meaningful lives.

Early in my career, I began noticing something that changed the way I viewed every program I planned. Residents didn't come because they loved every activity. They came because they wanted to be with people. They came because someone knew their name. They came because it gave them something to look forward to. They came because it reminded them they still belonged somewhere.

That realization changed everything.

I stopped asking myself, "What activity should we do today?" Instead, I began asking, "How can I help people connect today?" Sometimes the answer was music. Sometimes it was a game. Sometimes it was a discussion group where residents shared stories from their lives. The activity itself wasn't the goal. The relationships that formed because of the activity were.

I learned that purpose looks different for every person. One resident found purpose by welcoming every new resident who moved into the community. Another loved helping me decorate for holidays. Someone else enjoyed passing out supplies before an activity began. Others simply found purpose by encouraging the person sitting beside them. They weren't just participants. They were contributors. They still had something to give.

Growing up in church had quietly prepared me for this long before I realized it. Church wasn't simply about attending worship each Sunday. People found purpose there. Someone taught Sunday school. Someone sang in the choir. Someone prepared meals. Someone greeted visitors at the front door. Someone arranged flowers. Someone folded bulletins. Every person had an opportunity to contribute, regardless of age. I had watched that happen my entire childhood without realizing how much it would influence my career.

As an Activity Director, I discovered that older adults wanted the very same thing. They didn't want to spend their days simply being cared for. They wanted to continue caring for others. They wanted to help set up chairs, water plants, welcome newcomers, fold laundry for a service project, sing, pray, laugh, share memories, and encourage their friends. Even when someone's physical abilities changed, their desire to make a difference rarely disappeared.

One of the greatest gifts older adults gave me was teaching me that purpose doesn't retire. A person's job may end. Their children may grow up. Their health may change. But the desire to matter remains. I watched residents come alive when they realized they still had something meaningful to contribute. Sometimes all it took was asking for their help instead of automatically doing everything for them.

That lesson has stayed with me throughout my career. Whether I was leading a small discussion group, planning a holiday celebration, organizing a community event, or simply sitting with someone in the hallway, I tried to remember that my job wasn't to entertain people. My job was to create opportunities for people to connect, contribute, and remember that they still mattered.

Looking back, I realize this lesson didn't begin in senior living. It began years earlier as I watched my parents build church communities where everyone had a place. Ministry wasn't about doing everything for people. It was about helping people discover that they had gifts to share. Without realizing it, I carried that philosophy into every senior living community where I worked.

When people ask me what I did for a living, I usually tell them I worked in activities. But if I'm honest, that title never fully captured the work. I wasn't simply planning events. I was helping people build friendships, rediscover purpose, and continue writing meaningful chapters of their lives. Looking back now, I realize that everything I learned growing up in church pointed me toward that calling. That explains a lot.

Chapter 14

Every Person Has a Story

After working in senior living for a few years, I began noticing something that changed the way I looked at people forever. Every resident had a story, and most of those stories had very little to do with the person I met inside the community. It was easy to see someone using a walker or sitting quietly in a wheelchair and forget that they had lived an entire lifetime before arriving there. The longer I worked with older adults, the more I realized I wasn't just caring for residents. I was caring for former teachers, farmers, factory workers, homemakers, military veterans, business owners, musicians, nurses, parents, grandparents, and neighbors. Every person had lived a life that deserved to be remembered.

Some residents loved sharing those stories. They would tell me about the day they met their spouse, the job they held for forty years, the house they built with their own hands, or the children they raised. Others rarely spoke about themselves unless someone took the time to ask. I learned that one simple question could open the door to an hour of conversation. Sometimes all I had to say was, "Tell me about your life," and suddenly I wasn't talking to a resident anymore. I was talking to a young mother raising four children during difficult times, a World War II veteran recalling his first day overseas, or a woman describing what it was like to teach in a one-room schoolhouse.

Those conversations became one of my favorite parts of the job. They reminded me that every person wants to be known. We all want someone to care enough to ask where we've been, what we've experienced, and what has mattered most to us. I discovered that listening to someone's story was one of the greatest ways to honor their life.

Growing up as a preacher's kid had quietly prepared me for those conversations. My parents spent their lives listening to people. Church wasn't just a place for worship. It was a place where people shared joys, worries, disappointments, celebrations, and dreams. Around our dinner table, I often heard stories about lives that had been changed, families that were struggling, and people who simply needed someone to listen. Although I didn't realize it then, I was learning that stories connect us in ways facts never can.

As the years passed, I noticed something else. The more I listened, the more creative my work became. When I knew someone's story, I could create activities that meant something. Music wasn't just entertainment if it reminded someone of dancing with their spouse. A baking program wasn't just making cookies if it reminded someone of afternoons spent in the kitchen with their grandmother. A baseball discussion wasn't simply about sports if it brought back memories of taking a child to their first game. People's stories became the foundation for meaningful experiences.

Eventually, I realized this way of seeing people didn't stay at work. I found myself becoming curious wherever I went. Standing in line at the grocery store, riding in an elevator, sitting in an airport, or talking with someone over a cup of coffee, I wondered, "What's their story?" I stopped

seeing strangers as strangers. I began seeing them as people carrying experiences I knew nothing about.

That curiosity has stayed with me throughout my life. It has shaped the way I care for people, the way I build friendships, and even the way I write. When I sit down to tell a story today, I rarely begin with an event. I begin with a person. Events come and go, but people stay with us. The older I get, the more convinced I become that the greatest stories are not about extraordinary moments. They are about ordinary people whose lives quietly change ours.

Looking back, I realize my career wasn't really about activities, social work, or senior living. Those were simply the settings where I learned one of life's greatest lessons. Every person has a story worth hearing, and if we slow down long enough to listen, they will often leave us with a story we carry for the rest of our lives.

When I think about the chapters of my own life, I realize they have almost always begun with another person's story. My parents, church members, residents, coworkers, families, and strangers have all become part of who I am. They may never know how much they influenced me, but each one left something behind. Looking back, I don't simply remember the places where I've worked or the communities where I've lived. I remember the people. That explains a lot.

Chapter 15

Planting Seeds

One of the greatest lessons my parents ever taught me wasn't something they sat me down to explain. It was something I watched them live. As ministers, they spent countless hours serving behind the scenes. They visited people in hospitals when no one else knew they were there. They made phone calls that were never announced. They encouraged volunteers, listened to concerns, and quietly invested in people without expecting recognition. I rarely heard either of my parents talk about receiving credit for what they had done. Instead, they seemed genuinely happy watching someone else grow because of a seed they had planted.

As a child, I didn't fully appreciate that lesson. Like most young people, I assumed leadership meant standing in front of people. I thought making a difference meant being noticed. Looking back now, I realize my parents showed me something very different. Real leadership often happens where very few people are looking.

During our years in both Bedford and Richmond, my parents led major capital campaigns that resulted in additions to each church. Those projects required vision, planning, fundraising, countless meetings, and the willingness to encourage an entire congregation toward a shared goal. As a child, I mostly noticed the construction. I watched new spaces being built and enjoyed exploring them when they were finished. Years later, I realized that the buildings were only part of what my parents were creating.

The real work happened long before the first shovel ever touched the ground.

They were planting seeds of generosity. They were helping people believe in a shared vision. They were empowering church members to use their gifts, contribute their resources, and become part of something larger than themselves. The new classrooms and gathering spaces were visible, but the deeper work was happening in people's hearts. I imagine there were countless conversations I'll never know about, moments of encouragement, prayers, difficult decisions, and quiet acts of leadership that helped those projects become reality.

Looking back, I realize that's how ministry often works. You plant seeds and trust that someone else may one day enjoy the harvest.

I carried that lesson into my own career without even realizing it. In senior living, I discovered that some of the most meaningful parts of my job happened behind the scenes. Residents saw the holiday party, but they didn't see the hours spent planning it. Families enjoyed a beautiful celebration, but they didn't see the volunteers who helped decorate or the staff who quietly worked together to make it happen. The success of an event was rarely about one person. It was about many people contributing in ways that often went unnoticed.

As I grew in my career, I became more comfortable stepping back and watching others shine. One resident discovered a hidden talent. Another volunteer became a leader. A staff member

gained confidence because someone believed in them. Those moments brought me just as much joy as receiving recognition myself. I realized I didn't need to stand in the spotlight to know that I had made a difference. Sometimes the greatest reward was simply watching someone else succeed because you had encouraged them along the way.

That philosophy has stayed with me throughout my life. Whether leading an activity department, serving alongside coworkers, or simply encouraging someone who needed a little confidence, I have found joy in planting seeds. The seed may be a conversation, an opportunity, an encouraging word, or simply believing in someone before they believe in themselves. You don't always get to see what grows from those moments, but that doesn't make them any less important.

When I think about my parents now, I realize they probably planted thousands of seeds throughout their ministry. Some grew quickly. Others may have taken years before anyone noticed the fruit. There are undoubtedly lives they influenced without ever knowing the full impact of their faithfulness. They seemed to understand something that has taken me years to learn: we are responsible for planting the seeds, not controlling the harvest.

That lesson has changed the way I live. I no longer feel the need to receive credit for everything I do. If someone else succeeds because of a conversation we shared, I celebrate. If an idea grows beyond anything I imagined, I celebrate. If something I quietly started helps another person years later, that is enough. The seed was never about me in the first place.

Looking back over my life, I can now see that my parents weren't simply building churches. They were building people. The buildings still stand today, but their greatest legacy isn't found in bricks, classrooms, or sanctuaries. It lives in the people they encouraged, empowered, and believed in. Without realizing it, they taught me that the most meaningful work often happens quietly, behind the scenes, where very few people are watching. That lesson has shaped the way I lead, the way I serve, and the way I care for others. When I think about why I find so much joy in planting seeds and watching others grow, I don't have to wonder where it came from. That explains a lot.

Chapter 16

Everyone Needs Something to Look Forward To

One of the greatest lessons I learned during my years in senior living was that everyone needs something to look forward to. It didn't matter whether someone was ninety-five years old or twenty-five years old. Hope often begins with having something on the calendar that reminds us tomorrow can still hold joy.

When I first started working in activities, I thought my job was to fill a monthly calendar. I wanted to create programs that residents would enjoy, but it didn't take long to realize I wasn't simply creating activities. I was creating anticipation. Residents would stop me in the hallway and ask, "What's happening tomorrow?" or "When are we taking the bus trip?" Sometimes they would ask about an event that was still weeks away. They weren't just asking for information. They were giving themselves something to look forward to.

As I watched their excitement grow, I began thinking back to my own childhood. Looking forward to something had always been a part of my life. I counted down the days until church camp every summer. I looked forward to our family vacation each August, youth group events, mission trips, basketball games, and Christmas. Those moments gave each season its own rhythm. They reminded me that life wasn't simply about getting through today. There was always something meaningful waiting around the corner.

As I grew older, I realized my parents were masters at creating that sense of anticipation. I can still remember them preparing for special worship services and church events. My mom had an incredible gift for planning beautiful Christmas Eve services. She thoughtfully combined music, Scripture, candlelight, and artistic touches that transformed an ordinary evening into something people eagerly anticipated every year. Families didn't simply attend the service. They looked forward to it for weeks. The sanctuary felt different. The music felt different. Even as a child, I could sense that something special was about to happen.

My dad brought another dimension to those experiences. Music wasn't just part of worship for him. It was woven into who he was. He directed choirs, encouraged musicians, and even wrote hymns that became part of the church's worship life. He had a remarkable ability to bring energy and life into a congregation through music. Watching him taught me that music does far more than fill silence. It creates emotion, builds community, and gives people memories they carry for years.

Looking back now, I realize my parents weren't simply planning church services. They were creating experiences that people would remember long after they left the sanctuary. The Christmas Eve service lasted an hour, but the anticipation lasted for weeks and the memories lasted for years. They understood that meaningful moments don't just happen. They are thoughtfully prepared, lovingly planned, and shared with others.

Without realizing it, I carried those lessons into my own career. When I planned holiday celebrations, concerts, themed dinners, or community outings, I wasn't simply filling dates on a calendar. I wanted residents to experience the same excitement I had felt growing up. Decorations would begin appearing weeks before Christmas. Residents would help prepare for events. They would talk about upcoming entertainers, special meals, and bus trips long before they happened. Sometimes the conversations leading up to an event were just as meaningful as the event itself.

I discovered that anticipation has a way of creating hope. When someone has something to look forward to, tomorrow begins to matter a little more. That lesson wasn't limited to senior living. I have seen it throughout every stage of life. People look forward to weddings, vacations, family gatherings, birthdays, graduations, retirement, and the arrival of grandchildren. Looking ahead reminds us that our story is still being written.

That realization has shaped the way I try to live today. I enjoy planning my next project, writing my next book, taking the next trip, or finding another way to encourage people. Having something meaningful on the horizon keeps me moving forward. It reminds me that there is always another chapter to write and another opportunity to make a difference.

When I think about where that philosophy began, my mind doesn't first go to a senior living community. It goes back to Bedford and Richmond. I picture my mom carefully preparing another beautiful Christmas Eve service. I hear my dad leading music that filled the sanctuary with joy. I remember a church family looking forward to gathering together because someone had thoughtfully created an experience worth anticipating.

Those memories quietly became part of the way I lead, the way I serve, and the way I care for people. Looking back, I realize I've spent much of my life trying to give others the same gift my parents gave so many people: something to look forward to. That explains a lot.

Chapter 17

Everyone Has Something to Give

When I first began working in senior living, I thought my job was to organize activities. It didn't take long for me to realize that my work was much deeper than filling a monthly calendar. I wasn't simply planning bingo games, bus trips, holiday parties, or exercise classes. My real responsibility was helping people remember that they still had something valuable to offer. The residents I met had spent decades building careers, raising families, serving their communities, leading churches, volunteering, teaching, farming, owning businesses, and caring for others. They had accumulated wisdom that couldn't be found in any textbook. They didn't lose those gifts simply because they moved into a retirement community. Sometimes they just needed someone to recognize those gifts and invite them to use them again.

As I grew into my career, I began asking myself where this philosophy had come from. The more I reflected, the more I realized it hadn't started when I became an Activity Director. It had started years earlier in the churches my parents served in Bedford and Richmond. Looking back now, I realize those congregations helped raise me almost as much as my own parents did. They became an extended family that quietly shaped my understanding of community, service, and the value of every person.

Growing up, I was surrounded by people of every age and every background. There were retired farmers who had worked the same land for decades, teachers who spent their lives helping children learn, factory workers who faithfully provided for their families, nurses who cared for people when they were at their weakest, business owners who invested in the community, musicians who shared their gifts every Sunday, and volunteers who rarely sought recognition. As a child, I didn't think much about the different roles people played. I simply assumed that church happened because everyone showed up and did their part.

Looking back, I can see just how remarkable that was. Some people faithfully taught Sunday school classes year after year, shaping generations of children without expecting applause. Others quietly prepared communion every Sunday morning so the congregation could worship without giving a second thought to everything that had been done beforehand. Some organized Vacation Bible School every summer, while others decorated classrooms, cooked meals, folded bulletins, mowed the lawn, sang in the choir, counted the offering, served on committees, visited people in the hospital, or made sure visitors felt welcome the moment they walked through the doors. They all served differently, but every role mattered.

My parents certainly worked hard as ministers, but they never acted as though the church belonged to them. They believed the church belonged to the congregation. They were constantly encouraging people to use their own gifts and talents. Looking back, I realize they were always empowering others. They didn't measure success by how much they could accomplish themselves. They measured success by how many people they could help become involved. I watched ordinary people become leaders because someone believed in them. I watched volunteers discover talents they didn't know they had. I watched friendships develop because

people served together. Those experiences quietly taught me that the healthiest communities are built when everyone has the opportunity to contribute.

One of the things I admired most about both the Bedford and Richmond congregations was the way people genuinely cared for one another. When someone was sick, meals appeared at their home. When a family experienced loss, the church surrounded them with love. When a new family arrived, people introduced themselves and made them feel welcome. Birthdays were celebrated, accomplishments were recognized, and difficult seasons were shared. It wasn't perfect, but there was a genuine commitment to walking through life together. As a child, I simply thought that's what communities did. Looking back now, I realize not every community functions that way.

Years later, when I found myself working in senior living, I unknowingly tried to recreate that same sense of belonging. Instead of asking what activity I should schedule next, I found myself asking how I could help people become part of the community. A retired teacher could help another resident learn a new game. A former gardener could help care for the flowers. A lifelong musician could lead a sing-along. Someone who had always welcomed people at church naturally became the first person to greet new residents. I wasn't assigning jobs. I was helping people rediscover their purpose.

The more I did this, the more convinced I became that purpose doesn't retire. People never stop wanting to matter. They never stop wanting to contribute. They never stop wanting to know that their experiences, talents, and kindness can still make someone else's life better. I had watched that truth unfold every Sunday growing up in Bedford and Richmond, and now I was seeing it unfold again in a completely different setting.

Today, when I think about why I have spent my career bringing people together, encouraging volunteers, building teams, and helping people discover their strengths, I don't immediately think about my education or my job titles. My mind goes back to those church families who showed me what a healthy community looks like. They taught me that every person has something to give, that every gift has value, and that the strongest communities are built one act of service at a time. I didn't realize I was learning those lessons as a little boy sitting in the pews of Bedford and Richmond, but they have influenced every stage of my life since. Looking back now, I understand that those congregations weren't simply places where my parents served. They were places that quietly shaped the person I would become. That explains a lot.

Chapter 18

My First Caregivers..Little Old Ladies

When I think about the people who first taught me what caregiving looked like, my mind doesn't go to my first job in senior living or even to my years studying social work. It goes back to First Christian Church in Richmond, Indiana. Long before I understood the meaning of caregiving, there were people quietly caring for me every Sunday. They didn't call themselves caregivers, and I certainly didn't think of them that way as a little boy. They were simply members of my church family who made me feel seen, welcomed, and loved.

Every Sunday, there was a group that I call my "Little Old Ladies" who would always be waiting for me in the back of the church. Somehow, no matter how busy the morning was, they always found a few minutes to stop and talk. They knew my name, asked how school was going, and remembered the things that were important to me. Before long, they figured out that I loved baseball. That became our conversation almost every week. They asked about my favorite teams, the latest games, and the players I admired. Looking back, I doubt they followed baseball nearly as closely as I did, but they listened with genuine interest because they knew it mattered to me.

Those conversations were never rushed. They made me feel important. Before I ran off to find my parents or my friends, one of them would usually smile, gently pinch my cheeks, and tell me how much I had grown. At the time, I probably reacted as any little boy would. I smiled, laughed, and secretly hoped they wouldn't pinch my cheeks quite so hard. I had no idea those few minutes every Sunday were quietly shaping my life.

I had dimples, and I still have dimples. These little old ladies would pinch my cheeks. I felt a sense of belonging when I was with them. They made me feel safe, and I wanted to see them every Sunday morning.

Looking back now, I realize those little old ladies were my first caregivers. They weren't simply talking to the preacher's kid because they felt obligated to. They noticed me. They remembered what I enjoyed. They asked thoughtful questions, listened carefully, and made sure I knew I belonged. They invested in me without expecting anything in return. They probably never imagined that those simple conversations would stay with me for the rest of my life.

As I spent more than twenty-five years working with older adults, I often found myself doing the very same things they had done for me. I learned residents' favorite hobbies. I remembered the names of their children and grandchildren. I asked about doctor's appointments, birthdays, vacations, and milestones. I discovered that one of the greatest ways to care for someone is to remember what matters to them. I didn't realize it at the time, but I was practicing what those little old ladies in the back of the church had modeled for me years earlier.

Those relationships also gave me something else that I didn't fully appreciate until much later. They made me comfortable around older adults. While many children naturally spent most of their time with kids their own age, I genuinely enjoyed talking with adults and seniors. My

friendships with those little old ladies taught me that older adults weren't just people who sat in the pews every Sunday. They had stories to tell, wisdom to share, and time to invest in a young boy. Looking back, I can see they were helping prepare me for a career I would not begin until many years later.

As life moved forward, things naturally began to change. I graduated from high school, attended Bethany College, and eventually began my career in senior living. The work I loved also brought new responsibilities. Weekends became some of my busiest days because families visited, special events were planned, and residents deserved meaningful weekends together. Little by little, attending church every Sunday became more difficult. It wasn't that I stopped believing or intentionally walked away. Life simply became busy, and my work often called me to serve people on Sunday mornings.

Even during those years, I never lost what those little old ladies had given me. Their kindness stayed with me. Their encouragement stayed with me. Most importantly, the way they cared for me became part of who I was, even when I didn't realize it. Every meaningful conversation I had with a resident, every time I stopped to really listen to someone's story, and every effort I made to help someone feel valued was rooted in lessons I had learned decades earlier in the back of First Christian Church in Richmond.

Today, I understand that those little old ladies gave me much more than pleasant Sunday morning conversations. They showed me that caregiving isn't always found in grand gestures or important titles. Sometimes it happens in a simple conversation, in remembering someone's favorite baseball team, or in taking a few minutes to let a child know they matter. They probably never imagined that the little boy whose cheeks they pinched every Sunday would spend his life caring for older adults. They certainly never knew they were helping shape the person I would become.

Looking back now, I realize they were planting seeds long before I knew they were there. Their quiet kindness became part of my story, and although there would be a season when I drifted away from attending church regularly because of the demands of life and work, the lessons they taught me never left. Those seeds remained, waiting for the right season to grow again. Looking back, I realize my first caregivers weren't residents in a senior living community. They were the faithful little old ladies waiting in the back of First Christian Church in Richmond every Sunday morning. That explains a lot.

Chapter 19

When Sunday Became a Workday

There was a season in my life when I stopped attending church regularly on Sundays. It wasn't because I had lost my faith or decided church was no longer important to me. Life changed. After graduating from Bethany College and beginning my career in senior living, I entered a profession where weekends were often the busiest and most important days of the week. While many people were getting ready for church on Sunday mornings, I was getting ready to serve residents and their families.

At first, I assumed this season would only last a short time. I thought eventually my schedule would change, or I would find a position that allowed me to be back in church every Sunday. Instead, one year turned into several years, and before I knew it, working weekends had simply become part of my life. Sundays became another workday.

Looking back now, I realize there was something I missed that I didn't fully recognize at the time. In the last chapter, I shared the story of the little old ladies in the back of First Christian Church in Richmond. Every Sunday, they welcomed me with smiles, asked about school, talked baseball, and reminded me that I mattered. As a child, I thought those conversations were just part of going to church. I didn't understand that they were caring for me. When my Sundays became filled with work, I wasn't just missing a worship service. I was missing those kinds of relationships. I missed being known. I missed seeing familiar faces. I missed the simple conversations that quietly reminded me I belonged somewhere.

Church had always been more than a place to worship. It was where people celebrated life's milestones together, prayed for one another, laughed together, and walked through difficult seasons side by side. Growing up, I never questioned whether I had a church family because it had always been there. It wasn't until I no longer had that weekly connection that I realized how much those relationships had meant to me.

At the same time, I knew my work mattered. Every Sunday, I walked into a community filled with older adults who also needed connection. Many of them had spent decades faithfully attending church before health challenges made that difficult. Some missed their home churches. Others missed singing the hymns they had known since childhood. Many missed being around people who knew them. Families often visit on weekends, making Sundays some of the busiest and most meaningful days in senior living. My responsibility was to help create opportunities for joy, friendship, worship, and belonging.

As I look back, I can see that I was giving away many of the same gifts that had been given to me years earlier. I greeted residents by name. I remembered their stories. I learned about their families, their favorite hobbies, and the things that brought them joy. I stopped to listen instead of rushing to the next task. Without realizing it, I was becoming a lot like the ladies in the back of the church who had invested in a little boy every Sunday morning. Their example had become part of who I was.

There were many Sundays when we held worship services inside our senior living communities. Local pastors, musicians, and volunteers would come to lead services for residents who could no longer attend their own churches. I often found myself setting up chairs, arranging the room, welcoming residents, handing out hymnals, and making sure everyone had what they needed. I wasn't sitting in a pew, but I was helping create a place where people could continue practicing the faith that had sustained them throughout their lives. Looking back, I realize that even though I wasn't attending church regularly myself, I was still helping bring church to others.

Even so, something inside me was missing. I loved my work, and I believed I was exactly where I needed to be professionally, but I slowly realized there was a difference between helping others experience community and experiencing it myself. I spent my weekends making sure residents felt connected, encouraged, and cared for, yet I wasn't allowing myself to receive those same gifts. Caregivers often become so focused on taking care of others that they forget they also need a place to belong.

I don't regret those years because they shaped me into the caregiver I would become. They taught me compassion, patience, and the importance of showing up for people during ordinary moments. They also helped me understand that ministry doesn't only happen inside a church building. Sometimes it happens in a dining room, during an activity, or while sitting beside someone who simply needs a friend. Still, I believe that season was preparing me for something I couldn't yet see.

Years later, my life would take an unexpected turn as I packed up everything I owned and moved from Pennsylvania to Florida. More on that coming in chapter 21. But first, I need to tell you my experience and struggles during COVID. I had no idea that I would once again find a church family, or that one conversation with a woman named Mary would forever change the way I looked at the name of my new church. Looking back, I can see that even though Sunday had become a workday, God had never stopped preparing me for the day I would find my way home again. That explains a lot.

Chapter 20

What Was Already Inside Me

COVID changed the world in ways none of us could have imagined. For those of us working in senior living, it wasn't something we watched happen from a distance. We lived it every day. The halls that had once been filled with conversation became quiet. Family visits stopped. Residents remained in their rooms. Activities that had always brought people together suddenly had to be completely reimagined. Every day seemed to bring new guidelines, new uncertainties, and new challenges. None of us knew exactly what tomorrow would look like, but we kept showing up because the people in our care depended on us.

One of the most difficult parts of that season was witnessing the loneliness. Residents who had spent their lives surrounded by family, friends, neighbors, and church communities suddenly found themselves isolated. Children and grandchildren waved through windows instead of sitting beside them. Worship services disappeared. Holidays looked different. Birthdays became quiet celebrations. Some residents understood what was happening, while others simply wondered why no one was coming to visit anymore. Watching that unfold day after day was heartbreaking.

As an Activity Director, everything I knew about bringing people together had to change. Hallway bingo replaced crowded activity rooms. Music was played through the hallways so residents could listen from their doorways. We celebrated birthdays outside room doors and searched for creative ways to remind people they were still seen, still valued, and still part of a community. Looking back, I realize that some of the smallest moments became the most meaningful. A conversation in a hallway, a smile behind a mask, or simply remembering someone's favorite song often meant more than any elaborate activity ever could.

As I reflect on that time, I can honestly say it was one of the darkest seasons of my life. I was physically exhausted, emotionally drained, and spiritually disconnected. I loved my work, and I believed deeply in what we were doing for our residents, but I had been pouring myself into everyone else for years without realizing how empty I had become. I was not taking care of myself. I would later discover that my own self-care is important, and I want to share how I do this with others. But more on that later. My career had gradually pulled me away from regular church life. I still believed in God, but I no longer felt connected to a church family. I missed having a place where people knew my story, prayed for me, and reminded me that I didn't have to carry life's burdens alone. At the time, I couldn't fully explain what I was feeling. I knew I was tired.

Looking back now, I wish I had the perspective I have today. During those difficult years, I often thought that because I wasn't active in a church, I had somehow become distant from God. Now I understand something completely different. God had never left me. His presence wasn't limited to a sanctuary on Sunday morning. He was with me in every resident's room, every difficult conversation with a family member, every exhausted coworker who kept showing up, and every quiet act of kindness that took place in those hallways. I hadn't learned to recognize Him there.

It also took me years to realize how deeply my childhood had prepared me for that moment. The churches in Bedford and Richmond had shaped me far more than I ever understood. My parents had modeled patience through decades of ministry. They had shown me what perseverance looked like during both joyful and difficult seasons. The congregations they served demonstrated quiet faithfulness by continuing to love and care for one another regardless of the circumstances. Those lessons had become part of me without my even realizing it.

I often think about the little old ladies in the back of First Christian Church in Richmond. Every Sunday, they asked about school, remembered my love for baseball, and made a little boy feel like he mattered. As a child, I thought they were being friendly. Looking back, I realize they were teaching me one of the greatest lessons in caregiving. People long to be noticed. They long to be remembered. They long to know they matter. During COVID, that lesson became more important than ever. Many residents didn't need me to solve their problems because I couldn't. They needed someone who would stop, remember their name, listen to their story, and remind them they weren't alone.

The more I reflect on that season, the more I realize I was living out everything those churches had taught me, even though I no longer felt connected to church life. Bedford and Richmond had become part of my character. My parents' example had become my example. The kindness of those church members had become the kindness I tried to offer every resident I served. The church had never really left me. It had simply become part of who I was.

When the pandemic finally began to ease, I sensed that my own life was about to change. I couldn't have explained why, but I knew one season was ending. About two years later, I packed everything I owned into moving pods, closed the door on the life I had built in Pennsylvania, and headed toward Florida. I believed I was moving for a new job and a fresh start. Looking back now, I know it was much more than that.

I didn't realize it then, but God was gently leading me toward a new chapter. I thought I was searching for a different place to live, but in many ways, He was leading me back to something I hadn't realized I had been missing for years. The little boy who grew up in Bedford and Richmond, the caregiver who spent years serving older adults, and the weary man who walked through the darkness of COVID were all about to discover that God had been writing one continuous story all along. My move to Florida wasn't the beginning of that story. It was the beginning of finally understanding it. That explains a lot.

Chapter 21

Every Day God Engages

When I packed everything I owned into moving pods and left Pennsylvania for Florida, I believed I was beginning another chapter in my life. I was starting a new job, moving to a new state, and leaving behind friendships, routines, and places that had been part of my life for many years. After spending more than twenty-five years working in senior living and social work, I had learned that change is rarely easy, but it often brings unexpected opportunities. Like anyone making a move that significant, I hoped I was making the right decision. Looking back now, I realize I was not simply moving to Florida. I was stepping into the next chapter of a story that God had been writing long before I recognized it.

It did not take long for me to fall in love with Central Florida. There was something about the area that immediately settled my spirit. The sunshine felt different after so many Pennsylvania winters. The lakes, the rolling hills around Groveland, and the slower pace of life made each day feel like a fresh beginning. Every drive through town reminded me that I had made the right decision. I enjoyed discovering new restaurants, new roads, and new places to explore. More than anything, I enjoyed the feeling that I had been given a fresh start. The move that had once felt uncertain slowly became one of the best decisions I had ever made. Looking back, I sometimes think God was preparing my heart before I ever walked through the doors of a church. Sometimes He changes our surroundings before He changes us.

As I settled into my new routines, one of the first things I wanted to do was find a church. During the years leading up to my move, my work schedule had slowly pulled me away from regular church attendance. Anyone who has worked in senior living understands that Sundays, weekends, and holidays are often the busiest times of the week. Then COVID created even more distance and isolation. My faith had never disappeared, but I had become disconnected from belonging to a local congregation. I missed worshiping with other people. I missed singing familiar hymns. I missed hearing Scripture read aloud. I missed serving alongside people who shared a common purpose. More than anything, I missed having a church family.

My first instinct was to look for a Christian Church, also known as the Disciples of Christ. That made sense because it was the faith tradition that had shaped my entire life. Bedford First Christian Church had nurtured my childhood. First Christian Church in Richmond had guided my teenage years. Bethany College had strengthened my connection to the denomination and prepared me for adulthood. Even though it had been years since I had regularly attended a Disciples congregation, it still felt like home. It was where I had learned about God's love, experienced genuine community, and discovered what it meant to care for other people. Returning to a Disciples church felt like the natural next step in my journey.

The Christian Church had always represented much more than a denomination to me. It was the place where I learned that everyone was welcome at Christ's table. It was where I learned that loving people mattered more than winning arguments. It was where I discovered that asking honest questions was part of growing in faith. It was where I experienced grace, kindness,

acceptance, and genuine community. Those lessons shaped far more than my spiritual life. They influenced the way I approached my career, my friendships, and every person I encountered. Looking back now, I realize I carried the values of the Christian Church with me long after I left Indiana.

When I searched for a Disciples congregation, I discovered there was not one close to where I lived. The nearest church was about an hour away. For a while, I considered making the drive each Sunday because this was the denomination that had raised me. The more I thought about it, however, the more I realized I wanted something more than a church I visited once a week. I wanted to become part of a local congregation. I wanted to know people by name, worship with neighbors, serve alongside them, and build relationships in the community where I now lived.

I began visiting churches throughout the area. Every congregation I visited was filled with kind and sincere people who loved God and cared deeply about their church. I appreciated every welcome I received. Yet each Sunday, I drove home with the same feeling. Something was still missing. Nothing was wrong with the churches I visited. They simply did not feel like home. After spending years away from regular church life, I did not want to settle for attending somewhere simply because it was nearby. I wanted to find the place where my heart settled, where I could grow, serve, and become part of a church family once again.

Eventually, a friend suggested I visit Edge United Methodist Church in Groveland. I am grateful they did because from the very first Sunday, something felt different. People welcomed me naturally. Conversations happened easily. No one pressured me to join. No one expected me to have everything figured out. They invited me to be part of the community. As I drove home after that first visit, I found myself thinking about Bedford and Richmond. The people were different, the traditions were different, but the feeling was remarkably familiar. It reminded me of what church had always meant to me: a place where people cared about one another.

As I continued attending Edge, I became curious about its history. I discovered that this congregation had been serving the Groveland community since 1909, when nine charter members officially organized the church in what was then known as Taylorville. One of those charter members was Elliott E. Edge, whose faithful support of the church and Methodist missions left such a lasting legacy that the congregation was eventually named in his honor. Learning about E. E. Edge and his family gave me a greater appreciation for the story I was becoming part of. His son, L. D. Edge, remained a lifelong member of the church, became Groveland's first mayor, and later served as the youngest Speaker of the Florida House of Representatives. Long before I ever arrived in Florida, faithful people had invested their lives in building a church that would serve its community for generations. Their faithfulness created a place where people could encounter God, serve others, and find a spiritual home. More than one hundred years later, I was becoming one of those people.

The more I learned about Edge, the more I realized I was not simply joining another church. I was becoming part of a legacy. Bedford First Christian Church had shaped my childhood. First Christian Church in Richmond had shaped my teenage years. Bethany College had shaped my young adulthood. Now Edge was becoming part of that same story. Looking back, I do not believe God was asking me to replace those earlier chapters. Instead, He was showing me that

every congregation that had loved me had prepared me for the next one. Faith is not a collection of separate experiences. It is one continuous journey.

As I continued attending Edge, I also found myself drawn to the theology and spirit of the United Methodist Church. Although I had grown up in the Disciples of Christ Church, I discovered that many of the values I cherished were shared here as well. The emphasis on grace, compassion, thoughtful faith, serving others, and building community resonated deeply with everything I had learned growing up. It did not feel as though I had left one tradition behind. Instead, it felt as though God had continued leading me along a path that had begun decades earlier.

Curious to understand more, I began reading about John Wesley and the history of the Methodist movement. One idea especially captured my attention: social holiness. At first, the phrase sounded unfamiliar, but the more I read, the more I found myself smiling. Wesley believed that faith was never intended to remain private. It was meant to be lived out in community. We grow closer to God by loving our neighbors, caring for people, serving those in need, showing compassion, and allowing our faith to shape the way we live each day. As I continued reading, I kept thinking to myself, *This is what I have been trying to live all along.*

Suddenly, so many parts of my own life began making sense. My years in senior living made sense. My work in memory care made sense. My passion for listening to older adults tell their stories made sense. Even my desire to create spaces where caregivers could encourage one another made sense. I realized I had not simply chosen careers that involved helping people. Without fully recognizing it, I had been living out my faith by caring for people every single day.

That realization brought me even closer to Edge. Instead of feeling as though I had wandered away from the church that had raised me, I realized God had gently guided me to another congregation whose mission and values aligned beautifully with everything I had learned growing up. Bedford had taught me faith. Richmond had taught me belonging. Bethany had taught me community. Edge was teaching me that God was still writing my story.

Today, I can honestly say that Edge United Methodist Church is my spiritual home. It is where I want to spend my Sundays worshiping with a local congregation. It is where I continue learning, serving, asking questions, and growing in my relationship with God. I have found peace there. That does not mean I have every answer or that my faith journey is complete. It simply means I have found a place where I can continue walking with God alongside people who genuinely care for one another. After all the moving, all the searching, and all the wondering where I belonged, I had finally found the place where my heart rests.

One of the people who made a lasting impact on me at Edge was Mary. From the beginning, she seemed to recognize something in me that I had not fully recognized in myself. She saw my passion for serving people and encouraging caregivers. We spent many hours talking about faith, purpose, and the experiences that had shaped my life. Over time, Mary became much more than someone I met at church. She became a trusted friend, one of my prayer partners, and someone God used to help me see my own story more clearly.

One Sunday morning, Mary picked up a small piece of paper and wrote four simple words: **EDGE: Every Day God Engages**. She handed it to me with a smile, probably never realizing how much those four words would change my life. At first, I thought it was a clever way to remember the church's name. Then I looked at it again. Those words stayed with me long after class had ended. They became more than an acronym. They became a new way of looking at my life.

As I reflected on those words over the following days, I began looking back over my life through a completely different lens. I realized God had been engaging with me every single day, even during seasons when I had not recognized His presence. He had been there in Bedford through parents who faithfully served a congregation. He had been there in Richmond through a youth group that welcomed an awkward eighth grader and gave him a place to belong. He had been there at Bethany College when I almost packed my car and drove home. He had been there through Indianapolis, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, and every resident, coworker, friend, and stranger who quietly shaped my life. He had been there during COVID, even when I felt spiritually disconnected. Looking back, I realized God had never stopped engaging with me. I had simply not learned to recognize Him in the ordinary moments of everyday life.

That realization changed everything. I no longer saw my life as a collection of unrelated experiences. I began to see one continuous story. Every move, every friendship, every challenge, every conversation, and every season had prepared me for something. None of it had been wasted. Looking back now, I believe God had been opening a door for me for years. Through one small piece of paper and four handwritten words, Mary helped me notice it. By God's grace, I reached for the handle, opened the door, and walked through it.

The journey that began with those four words would eventually become Mighty Caregivers. It would lead me to write, speak, build community, and encourage people who spend their lives caring for others. At the time, however, I had no idea where that journey would lead. I knew that I had found my spiritual home. I had found peace. After years of moving from one chapter of life to another, I had discovered a congregation where my past, my faith, and my calling came together in a way that finally made sense. That explains a lot.

Chapter 22

The Fire That Never Went Out

Looking back over my life, I have learned that God rarely reveals the whole journey at once. I have always wanted to know where He was leading before taking the next step. I wanted a roadmap, a destination, and some reassurance that what I was doing was making a difference. Instead, God has consistently given me just enough light to keep moving forward. It has only been by looking back that I have realized how every experience, every conversation, and every season was preparing me for something I could not yet see.

One of those defining moments began with a simple phone call in October 2016. My grandmother, Flo, had been diagnosed with dementia and was living in an assisted living community. My parents were doing everything they could to care for her, but dementia was unfamiliar territory for them. One day they called me with a question that completely caught me off guard. They asked, "Where do you get all of the engaging stuff you use with your residents?"

At first, it sounded like an ordinary question. As an Activity Director, I had spent years collecting games, music, conversation starters, sensory items, crafts, and activities that helped residents living with dementia remain engaged. I had attended conferences, learned from other professionals, and built a collection of ideas over many years. To me, it had become part of my daily work.

After I hung up the phone, I couldn't stop thinking about what my parents had asked. These were the same parents who had spent their lives caring for people through ministry. They knew how to comfort families, encourage people who were hurting, and faithfully walk beside others through difficult seasons. They visited hospitals and nursing homes, visiting people with dementia. Yet when it came to finding practical ways to engage someone living with dementia, they didn't know where to begin. That realization changed the way I looked at caregiving. If my own parents needed help finding resources, how many other families were asking the very same question? They loved the people they were caring for. They need someone to help them discover practical ways to care for the people they love.

That single phone call became the spark.

I remember this like it was yesterday. I was sitting on my deck on October 1, 2016, and I sat down at my laptop and wrote a simple Facebook post. It read, "I am starting Engaging Dementia. I hope this helps people to engage with dementia." I had no business plan. I wasn't trying to create a nonprofit or launch a ministry. I believed that if I shared what I had learned over the years, perhaps another caregiver would find encouragement or discover an idea that made caring for someone just a little easier.

From that day forward, I began writing intentionally. I shared stories from senior living, practical engagement ideas, lessons I had learned, and reflections about caregiving. I started a blog and wrote hundreds of Facebook posts. Along the way, I considered turning it into a business. Other

times, I wondered if it should become a nonprofit. Every time I thought I had found the right direction, another possibility would appear. Even though people were reading and caregivers were telling me the posts were helping them, I still questioned what I was doing. I wondered if it was making enough of a difference. More than once, I stopped writing altogether, convinced the idea had reached its end. Then another conversation, another caregiver, or another opportunity would reignite something inside me, and I would begin again. Looking back now, I realize this cycle continued for nearly ten years. At the time, it felt frustrating. Today, I understand that God was teaching me perseverance before He ever revealed the purpose.

During that same season, just eight years later, another important chapter of my life was beginning. A new pastor arrived at Edge United Methodist Church in Groveland. Her name was Pastor Patti Aupperlee. We began talking, brainstorming, and dreaming about ways the church could better support caregivers. We shared the same heart for helping people, but neither of us knew exactly what that would look like. Pastor Patti never handed me a blueprint or told me what the ministry should become. Instead, she gave me something much more valuable. She gave me the freedom to grow. She trusted me to explore ideas, ask questions, and discover what God might be building one step at a time.

I started describing the process with two simple words: **very fluid**. I intentionally refused to force the ministry into one direction. If another opportunity appeared, I followed it. Sometimes I focused on practical caregiving ideas. Other times, I explored faith, encouragement, self-care, or community partnerships. I decided that if I ever reached a point where this no longer felt like where God was leading me, I would either stop completely or change directions. I wasn't going to force something simply because I had invested years into it. I wanted to remain open to wherever God was leading. Looking back now, I realize I thought I was managing a project. God was shaping a calling.

Around that same time, I stepped away from my full-time position at a retirement community in The Villages. Instead, I accepted two part-time roles. One was serving as the Church Administrator at Edge United Methodist Church. The other was working in sales for a senior publication. Somewhere in the middle of those changes, I decided to sign up to drive for Uber.

At the time, driving for Uber was simply a practical decision. I wanted to earn a little extra income. I never imagined it would become one of the most important parts of my journey. If someone had told me years earlier that driving strangers around Central Florida would become part of God's plan for my life, I would have found that hard to believe.

Like most people, I assumed driving for Uber was simply about taking passengers from one place to another. It didn't take long to discover there was an entire culture inside those rides. Some passengers preferred complete silence. Others wanted to tell you their entire life story before you reached their destination. I quickly learned how to recognize the difference. I never wanted to force a conversation, but I also discovered that many people wanted someone who would genuinely listen.

Not every conversation was about caregiving.

Some people talked about sports. Others shared stories about vacations, work, family, or why they were visiting Florida. Every ride was different, and I genuinely enjoyed that. Over time, however, I noticed something interesting. Many passengers would eventually ask the same question.

"So, what else do you do besides driving?"

I always answered the same way.

"I am a caregiver."

That answer almost always caught people by surprise. It was not what they expected to hear. Sometimes they would ask about my work in senior living. Other times, they would pause for a moment and then begin talking about someone in their own lives. Almost without realizing it, the conversation would shift.

A daughter would begin telling me about caring for her mother with dementia. A husband would share the challenges of supporting his wife through cancer. A son would talk about the difficult decisions he was making for his father. Professional caregivers would describe the emotional weight they carried every day. Strangers trusted me with stories they had never planned to tell.

I wasn't interviewing people. I wasn't searching for stories. I was listening.

The more I listened, the more I realized how many people quietly carried the responsibility of caring for someone else. Their situations were different, but their hearts sounded remarkably alike. They loved deeply. They worried constantly. They often felt exhausted, overwhelmed, and unseen.

Many days, after dropping off a passenger, I wouldn't accept another ride right away. Instead, I would pull into a nearby parking lot, open my journal, and begin writing. I didn't want to lose the story I had just heard. I wrote down the conversations, the emotions, the lessons, and the insights they had stirred inside me. Looking back, those parking lots became my writing office. Some of the most meaningful writing I have ever done began in the back seat of my car after a stranger trusted me with a piece of their life.

Those journal entries eventually became *Caregivers in the Back Seat*.

Every ride expanded my understanding of caregiving. I realized it wasn't confined to nursing homes, hospitals, or assisted living communities. Caregivers were everywhere. They were heading to the airport, shopping for groceries, on vacation, going to Universal or Walt Disney World, going to work, attending a conference, attending church, and quietly carrying responsibilities that most people never noticed. The fire that had first been lit after my parents called about Grandma Flo had never gone out. God had moved it from an activity room to the back seat of a car.

Slowly, everything began coming together. I realized caregiving wasn't limited to healthcare professionals or family members. Caregiving happens every day when someone notices another person, listens without judgment, prepares a meal, gives a ride, offers encouragement, says a prayer, or simply chooses to be present. Caring for others is not just a responsibility. It is a way of living.

That realization eventually became the foundation for Mighty Caregivers.

Pastor Patti allowed that vision to continue growing naturally at Edge United Methodist Church. We didn't rush it or force it into a predetermined plan. We prayed, listened, experimented with new ideas, learned from the people around us, and trusted God to reveal the next step. The ministry remained very fluid because I had learned that God often reveals His plans one faithful step at a time, not all at once.

Today, I still approach Mighty Caregivers the same way. I don't want to force it into becoming something it was never meant to be. I want God to continue opening doors, and I want the courage to keep walking through them. Looking back, I now recognize what I couldn't see then. God was working in me through every conversation, every pause, every new direction, and every unexpected opportunity.

As I write these words, it is July 18, 2026. Nearly ten years have passed since I sat down at my computer and typed a simple Facebook post: "I am starting Engaging Dementia. I hope this helps people to engage with dementia." At the time, I had no idea where that small step would lead. I couldn't have imagined the many stories I would write, the conversations I would have, the people I would meet, or the doors God would open. Today, Mighty Caregivers is a ministry of Edge United Methodist Church, and I have the privilege of spending each day encouraging people who care for others. Looking back, I don't regret this journey for a single moment. It wasn't always easy. There were seasons of uncertainty, times when I questioned whether I should keep going, and moments when I wondered if any of it mattered. But every step taught me something, and every season prepared me for the next. I genuinely enjoy this ministry because it is no longer something I feel like I have to do. It has become part of who I am.

When I look back over these past ten years, I finally understand something that took nearly a decade to recognize. Mighty Caregivers did not begin with a Facebook page in 2016. It did not begin with Uber. It did not begin when it became a ministry at Edge United Methodist Church. Those were important chapters, but they were not the beginning of the story. The seeds were planted decades earlier in Bedford First Christian Church and First Christian Church in Richmond, Indiana. Those congregations loved me, encouraged me, cared for my family, and quietly shaped the person I would become. Long before there was a name like Mighty Caregivers, people were showing me what it meant to notice others, to serve faithfully, and to love without expecting anything in return. Looking back now, I can see that God had been writing this story all along. I just didn't recognize it until nearly ten years into the journey.

Those two congregations shaped me long before I realized they were doing it. My parents showed me what faithful caregiving looked like by the way they loved people every single day. The members of those churches taught me that everyone deserves to be noticed, remembered,

encouraged, and loved. They taught me that ministry happens one conversation and one relationship at a time. When my parents called asking how to engage Grandma Flo, they unknowingly awakened something that had been planted in me years before by those congregations. Every chapter since then has been another way of living out those lessons.

For years, I thought God was teaching me how to care for older adults. Looking back, I realize He was teaching me how to care for caregivers. That explains a lot.

Chapter 23

We Are All Mighty Caregivers

As Mighty Caregivers slowly began taking shape, I realized God was expanding my understanding of what it meant to be a caregiver. For years, I believed caregivers were easy to identify. I pictured nurses, nursing assistants, activity directors, social workers, hospice workers, and family members caring for someone with dementia or a serious illness. Those were the people I had spent my career serving alongside, and if someone had asked me to describe a caregiver, that would have been my answer.

Then I started paying closer attention.

It began with conversations in the back seat of my Uber. Some passengers shared stories about aging parents. Others talked about children with special needs, spouses facing illness, friends struggling with mental health, or neighbors who needed someone to check on them. The more people shared their lives with me, the more I realized caregiving wasn't limited to hospitals, nursing homes, or assisted living communities. Caregiving was happening everywhere. Teachers cared for students long after the school day ended. Pastors carried the joys and burdens of entire congregations. Friends faithfully sat beside someone who was grieving. Volunteers quietly delivered meals, drove neighbors to appointments, or made phone calls to people who felt forgotten. Caregiving looked different from person to person, but the heart behind it was always the same. It was choosing to invest in someone else's well-being.

That realization completely changed the way I viewed the world. I began noticing caregivers everywhere I went. They weren't wearing uniforms or name badges. Most of them didn't even think of themselves as caregivers. They were simply doing what love asked them to do. Somewhere along the way, a simple phrase came into my mind that captured everything I had been learning: **We are all Mighty Caregivers.** Those words weren't about creating an organization or giving people a title. They were a reminder that caring for one another is something we are all invited to do.

As exciting as that discovery was, God was teaching me something even more personal. While I had spent more than twenty-five years caring for residents, families, church members, coworkers, and strangers, I slowly realized I wasn't taking very good care of myself. I loved helping other people. I loved making someone smile, creating meaningful experiences, encouraging families, and walking beside people during difficult seasons. Caring for others had become such a natural part of my life that I rarely stopped to ask whether I was extending that same care to myself.

The honest answer was no.

I had spent years encouraging other people to live meaningful lives while often neglecting my own well-being. I wasn't consistently exercising. I wasn't making the healthiest choices. I carried stress longer than I should have. Like many caregivers, I believed there would always be time to

care for myself later. Eventually, I realized that "later" has a way of never arriving unless we intentionally make it a priority.

That realization became another turning point in my journey. Instead of asking only how I could encourage caregivers, I began asking how caregivers could learn to care for themselves so they could continue caring for others. I realized God had already provided many of the tools we needed. He had given us the gift of rest, meaningful friendships, community, prayer, movement, laughter, gratitude, and hope. These weren't complicated ideas. They were simple practices that had been available all along. The difference was that I finally decided to begin using them in my own life.

I didn't change overnight, and I certainly didn't do everything perfectly. I simply started taking one faithful step at a time. I began walking regularly. I made healthier food choices. I started losing weight. I paid attention to my emotional health instead of ignoring it. I became more intentional about spending time with people who encouraged me and strengthened my faith. Slowly, I discovered that caring for myself wasn't selfish. It was necessary. If I wanted to spend my life helping other people, I also needed to be a good steward of the life God had given me.

As my own life began changing, Mighty Caregivers changed with me. I no longer wanted to simply collect resources or offer advice. I wanted to share my own journey honestly. I wanted people to know what was helping me, where I was still growing, and what I was learning along the way. My hope was never to present myself as someone who had everything figured out. Instead, I wanted to walk alongside other caregivers, sharing both the victories and the struggles. If I was inviting others to care for themselves, I needed to be willing to do the same.

Today, everything I create through Mighty Caregivers grows out of my own journey. The stories I write, the books I publish, the videos I record, and the resources I share all come from experiences that have shaped my life. I don't write because I have all the answers. I write because I am still learning. Every day, I continue discovering new ways to care for myself so that I can better care for others, and I hope that by sharing my journey, someone else will find encouragement to begin or continue their own.

Looking back, I also realize something that fills me with gratitude. Long before I ever dreamed of Mighty Caregivers, I already had Mighty Caregivers in my own life. Bedford First Christian Church and First Christian Church in Richmond were much more than the churches where my parents served. They were communities that cared for our family in countless ways. They celebrated with us, prayed for us, encouraged us, laughed with us, and walked beside us through every season. The people in those congregations noticed me when I was a little boy, cheered me on as I grew up, and quietly demonstrated what a caring community looks like. They never imagined they were shaping the ministry I would someday begin, but they were. They were my Mighty Caregivers long before I had words to describe what they had given me.

When I look back over the entire journey, I can finally see how beautifully the pieces fit together. My parents modeled a life of caring. Those two congregations surrounded our family with love and support. My years in senior living taught me compassion. Grandma Flo awakened a new purpose. Uber taught me to listen to people's stories. Pastor Patti gave me the freedom to

let the vision grow naturally. Finally, God gently showed me that the caregiver also needs care. That may have been the lesson I needed most of all. Today, I am still learning, still growing, and still discovering what it means to faithfully care for others while also caring for myself. As I share that journey through Mighty Caregivers, I hope that others will discover they are not alone and that together we can become a community where everyone is encouraged, supported, and reminded that people matter. That explains a lot.

Chapter 24

That Explains a Lot

If you had asked me as a little boy what I wanted to be when I grew up, I doubt I would have answered Activity Director, social worker, Uber driver, author, or founder of Mighty Caregivers. I probably would not have imagined writing a book called *That Explains a Lot... I'm a Preacher's Kid*. At that age, I was living the life that had been given to me. I was moving from one church to another, making new friends, sitting in the front pew, attending church camp, eating potluck dinners, and watching my parents pour themselves into the lives of others. I thought I was just growing up.

Now I realize I was being shaped.

For many years, I looked at my life as a collection of unrelated chapters. My childhood was in Bedford. Then Richmond. There were mission trips, college, senior living, dementia care, social work, Uber, Florida, and Mighty Caregivers. Each season felt separate from the one before it. Looking back now, I see that none of those experiences stood alone. Every one of them prepared me for the next.

Growing up as a preacher's kid taught me that people matter. My parents never said those exact words every day, but they lived them. They stopped to listen. They visited people when no one else did. They celebrated life's happiest moments and stood beside families during their hardest days. They taught me that ministry was never just about Sunday morning. Ministry happened around dinner tables, in hospital rooms, on front porches, and in everyday conversations.

The churches we served taught me just as much. Bedford First Christian Church and First Christian Church in Richmond were not simply buildings where my parents worked. They became places where I learned what community looked like. The people in those congregations knew my name. They asked about school. They encouraged me. They celebrated my successes and cared about my life. Looking back, I realize those churches were caring for me long before I understood what caregiving meant. They were my Mighty Caregivers.

As I grew older, those lessons followed me into every career I pursued. Whether I was leading bingo, organizing activities, helping someone through a difficult diagnosis, sitting beside a resident with dementia, or listening to a passenger in the back seat of my Uber, I found myself returning to the same simple truth. Every person has a story. Every person wants to be seen. Every person wants to know they matter.

For a long time, I thought my calling was to care for older adults. Then I thought it was to support families living with dementia. Later, I believed it was to encourage caregivers. Each of those seasons was real, but none of them told the whole story. God was slowly broadening my vision, helping me see that caring is not limited to one profession, one age group, or one stage of life. It is a way of living.

Perhaps the biggest surprise of all has been discovering that I also needed care.

For years, I poured my energy into helping everyone around me. I found joy in encouraging others, solving problems, planning activities, and making difficult days a little brighter. Yet somewhere along the way, I forgot that caregivers are people too. We become so focused on helping others that we often neglect ourselves. I know that because I lived it.

Learning to care for myself has become one of the greatest lessons of my life. It has not happened all at once. It has happened one walk at a time, one healthier meal at a time, one conversation at a time, one prayer at a time, and one decision at a time. I have learned that caring for myself is not selfish. It allows me to continue caring for others with greater joy, greater patience, and greater compassion.

That is why I continue sharing my journey.

Every story I write, every reflection I share, every resource I recommend, and every conversation I have through Mighty Caregivers comes from my own life. I am not writing as someone who has arrived. I am writing as someone who is still learning. I hope that when people read my stories, they do not simply see my journey. I hope they begin to recognize pieces of their own.

One of the greatest gifts this journey has given me is the freedom to stop trying to have everything figured out. Earlier in my life, I often wanted to know exactly where God was leading before taking the next step. Today, I have learned to be comfortable with not knowing. Mighty Caregivers has grown because I have allowed it to remain open to where God leads next. It has been, and continues to be, very fluid. I have learned that faith is less about controlling the future and more about faithfully responding to the opportunities God places in front of me today.

People sometimes ask me what Mighty Caregivers is. I could talk about the books, the stories, the videos, the website, or the community that continues to grow, but none of those things are really the answer. Mighty Caregivers is my way of living out everything that shaped me. It is my way of saying thank you to the people who cared for me by caring for others. It is my way of sharing what I continue to learn about faith, compassion, relationships, and self-care. It is simply my life, offered in the hope that it might encourage someone else.

As I reflect on this journey, I no longer see disconnected chapters. I see a loving God weaving together experiences that often made little sense at the time. The moving trucks. The church pews. The potluck dinners. Honduras. Bethany College. The residents who became my teachers. Grandma Flo. The strangers in the back seat of my car. Edge United Methodist Church. Every conversation. Every challenge. Every unexpected opportunity. Together, they formed a story that I never could have written for myself.

Sometimes people ask me why I care so deeply about caregivers. Why do I keep writing? Why do I continue looking for ways to encourage people? Why do I believe caring for yourself is just as important as caring for others?

The answer is actually quite simple.

I was raised by people who cared.

I was surrounded by churches that cared.

I spent my career with people who cared.

I discovered that even caregivers need care.

When I put all of those pieces together, I can finally see what God was doing all along.

God was loving me.

That explains a lot.