



Atlanta Church of Christ in Gwinnett

www.acocg.org | info@acocg.org

The birds of the air come and perch in its branches.

- Matthew 13:32

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Welcome to the family!

The month of May and the first week of June saw three people complete their journey from darkness to light. As Carol Mukenya commented, "This is one of the ways that God is blowing us kisses during very challenging times!" This past Saturday, June 6th, Danijela Jean was baptized into Christ—



On May 29th, Elmer Santos was added to the Body. He studied primarily with the singles, but has begun building relationships with brothers in a variety of groups. Todd Shultz said, "He moved from New York last November with his father and is a joy to be around."



Elmer with Alan Rouse, Todd Shultz, and Tommy Underwood



Donnell Francis, Junie Saunders, Tommy, Austin Hartman, Daniel Boatnie (a campus brother from New York, home with his family for the summer), and Abram Rowell gathered around Elmer right before he was baptized.

And on May 14th, Aschelle Felder started her new life in Christ. She first came into contact with the church through her husband's brother, David Corley, and his wife Imani. In these pictures you can see Aschelle, her husband Marlon, their daughter Alyssa, the Corley family, the Mukenyas, Mary Fields, and the Rouses. Mary said, "Carol and I had been studying with Aschelle on Zoom! God works digitally too." Technology allowed several of the women to watch online as well, since with social distancing we couldn't all be there in person.



With many thanks to Mary Fields, Carol Mukenya, Todd Shultz, and Sherry Rouse for pictures and information!

Catching up with...



Julia Jennings

Where are you from originally? What would you like people to know about where you're from?

Lilburn. It was the number three most diverse suburb in the country at the time, so I liked growing up there. You could get a lot of different perspectives even within one school.

How did you come to live in the Atlanta area?

I went to UGA for a second, but I had to move back home due to health challenges—but then my house turned out to be contributing to those health challenges, due to a mold problem. While all that's being resolved, I'm living with the Berrys.

What do you do for a living? How did you come to be in that field?

I'm really still recovering from the health challenges, but in the meantime, I'm interning with the campus ministry here in Gwinnett. I was too sick to be in school or have a job for many years, so when I felt well enough I would help with the campus ministry at Georgia State, where I had attended school for a while. I really loved doing it, and it helped me realize that it was the most fulfilling work. It was a life-saving thing for me to do when life seemed empty because I was so sick. I guess that gave me the heart to want to help the campus ministry here when they asked me to intern.

Tell us how you first got involved with disciples – what was your first impression of them and of the church?

I grew up with parents who were disciples, so my first human experience was with disciples. As I grew up, I didn't really think about the church, it just *was*. The summer before high school, when I was fourteen, I started studying. Originally I didn't connect to Jesus's death as personal, more that He did it because it was "the right thing to do"—I didn't understand it. At the Swamp, Sonny Sessions in the Starlight Devo compared the large universe to how small we are; I was really prideful but also full of self-loathing, so it took away my self-importance and left me with just me—I felt ugly and small. Then Sonny talked about how Jesus died because God wanted a relationship with us. When Sonny choked up over it, his emotion shocked me, and I saw the cross for what it really was, in a new context—not right vs wrong, or Heaven vs hell, or pleasing your parents, but about a relationship with God. It really meant something to me that He wanted a relationship with me, so I started studying. I thought it would be quick, that my desire would make it easy, but I had to connect to myself, which was something I had always avoided doing. Marisabel Becker would ask me, "How does this scripture make you feel?" I would answer with what I thought, not what I felt. It was a hard nine-month process because it took a long time for me to figure out how I feel about things. I'm very grateful for the way Marisabel helped me understand and connect emotionally.

On my 15th birthday I got baptized. For a while, I delayed getting baptized because I was worried my conversion might be a phase, that I would drop it as I had done with other things, but eventually I realized that the decision is firm even though emotions go all over. Emotions change with life, but commitment is not based on emotions. If your heart, soul, mind, or strength go out of alignment, they can be brought back to God—He'll bring you back. The foundation is the agreement between you and God because you know what He did for you, and life is worthless without him, like Peter said in John 6. Sometimes life has seemed unbearable, but leaving God would only make it worse—there's nothing better than knowing God!

What has your biggest challenge been in following Jesus? How do you deal with it?

My health. When I was 17, I started having some energy issues and "random" health issues that became bigger over time—chemical sensitivities, chronic fatigue, mood-regulation difficulties, etc. It ended up being because my house was full of mold, and my parents had to gut the whole thing. But the doctors didn't know the cause, so I was misdiagnosed for seven years—they basically changed my medications every month for six years, which made everything worse, just compounded the problem. The medications impaired my ability to think and to feel, which made it difficult to connect with God. Eventually I literally couldn't read—even long text messages were difficult for me to process—and just moving from the couch to the bathroom used all the energy and motivation I had for the day. The wide range of side-effects destroyed my health, and it felt impossible to actually serve God. It was hard to pray or read my Bible or just live the life I wanted to live for God. There was a lot of isolation, and most of the time I felt condemned to live.

These issues made everything with Christianity difficult; it brought me closer to God but for a lot of it I had a hard time. I would repeat to myself, "I trust God, I trust God, I trust God" but things were always getting worse. I knew what I believed but it was hard to actually *feel* like God was with me or cared about me at all. It's been hard to recover from feeling abandoned, even though I knew I wasn't. The turning point was really miraculous—the doctors kind of agreed it was the end of the line as far as medical options, pretty much said, "Good luck," so I thought my life would stay the way it was. I had to come to a place of surrender—"Okay, from my perspective no good can come from me being this sick forever, not for me or for anyone else. No matter how hard I try, I can't see any good. But if God decides I won't get better, my perspective as a human is limited and God is God, He knows what He's doing and His plans are good. So even if I die and never understand, this is still good." At that point I just wanted to connect to God even if I didn't get well.

My mom had wanted me to see a doctor, a chiropractor; it sounded weird, but I had no energy to fight her on it, so about a week after I reached that point of surrender, I went. I was too sick to even sit up in the car on the way there and car rides always made me really nauseated; it was such a miserable drive for me that my mom almost turned around to give up on taking me. Thank God she didn't. The day after my second visit, I woke up and for the first time I could look in a mirror and see myself instead of a blurry image. I felt like myself a little bit. I could pray and feel God—it was really great! I cried a lot, and didn't trust it to last, but I was really grateful, even if it was only for that day. That doctor wound up being a gift from God; she helped me get off all those meds, she diagnosed the mold problem, and she is helping me overcome the chemical sensitivities and damage all the medications did to me. I feel like myself for the first time in eight or nine years. I got through a lot of it by focusing on being grateful for what God was teaching me and obsessively searching for the good in what I was experiencing, but eventually I learned I don't have to understand it—I just have to trust God. True surrender is when you can't see any good, can't spin it into something positive, but you believe in God. Even though everything surrounding you seems to give you reason not to, you trust God simply because of who He is.

What has surprised you most about life as a disciple?

The first five years, I was really surprised because I wasn't expecting to get so sick. When I was counting the cost, I had no idea what was ahead, all the mental and physical health issues. I was surprised God allowed something that felt like it was in the way of my serving him. I tried to do my best and glorify Him in different ways, but it was like, "Nope," and I couldn't see why it was happening. At times I was unable to even read anything, the Bible included, for months. I kept asking God, "How is this supposed to glorify you? I don't get it." More recently, I've been surprised by just truly how much power God has to move in my heart and help me repent. Surprised that the burden really is light—we're always struggling with sin, etc., but it's surprising how even in the course of just one prayer, when you ask, He really does change you. It's one of those things that I always "knew" but was really surprising and amazing when I actually felt it happen, amazed by how powerful He really is.

What lesson have you learned as a disciple that still helps you today?

After I had been sick for a few years, one year I got angry and had trouble surrendering it to God. I felt like a slave to anger—I felt hurt, betrayed, abandoned. I asked God, "How are you my protector?" I didn't know what to do with the anger I felt, and didn't know how to stop being angry. I was constantly thinking about leaving God or dying. Even once one of the medications I was on began to help, I knew I couldn't feel okay till I connected with God. I felt broken inside, powerless, angry at everyone and everything, especially myself. Eventually I finally sat down and prayed about my feelings—"I'm angry, and I'm angry about being angry, and I'm angry that I feel guilty and angry." Once I said it to God, I was able to feel how much I truly missed him, but I still felt overpowered by my anger and hurt. About a month later, I whispered a prayer, a desperate, hopeless plea for help, with the smallest faith I've ever had.

A couple of days later, I woke up and my first thought was "I'm not angry with God anymore! I want to have a quiet time"—just out of the blue. It shocked me. I went back to the scriptures that I knew I'd felt bitter about, and I couldn't even understand why I ever felt bitter about them in the first place. Like in Ezekiel, the heart of stone turning into a heart of flesh. A new heart and a new mind. It was the most powerful gift I've ever gotten from God, and I became more and more grateful. That faith-building morning became the foundation of faith that carried me through all that came after--my illness in the years following was way, way worse. I'd never felt so tormented and the hope for relief was increasingly bleak, but my heart and my faith were different because of that experience. I really *knew*, "He's real, and He loves me." I did nothing to deserve a new heart that day—it was His most gracious act, and it carried me through the pain. There were so many periods of time when I couldn't see Him or hear Him or feel Him anywhere, but because of that day when he rescued me from my angry, hardened heart, I knew he was still fighting for me. The experience made the scriptures real to me. I'm grateful for even the anger, the long period of pain – it made His gift a lot more meaningful, and taught me to trust His process.

What do you wish other people outside the church knew about following Jesus?

At the end of the day, it's not about the people in the church you're at, or the people who claim to represent or follow God. They can misrepresent Him. I've seen people leave God over what people in the church have done. God is much bigger and more valuable than that! People are imperfect, but God is God. See Him through the scriptures—actually *know Jesus*, not people!

What is your favorite scripture?

One I go back to often is **Psalm 63:1-8**. When I pray through it, it always stirs something in my heart and helps me realign what I'm feeling with who God is—it reminds me how much I love God even when times are hard.

What do you enjoy doing in your spare time?

I like hiking, canoeing, lying in the sun, doing anything outside! I enjoy yoga, laughing, connecting with people and spending time with them—things I couldn't do for so long.

What might someone be surprised to know about you?

I can tear an apple in half with my bare hands.

If you could speak to yourself as you were ten years ago, what advice would you give yourself?

Ten years ago I was a new disciple, almost a year old; I think I would tell myself not to abandon myself and not to fight myself so much, but to allow, accept, and embrace who I am.



Rejoicing with those who rejoice!

We're all feeling the strain of not being able to be together face-to-face yet with those outside our own households. Technologies such as Zoom and Teams, Skype and Facetime have given us the joy of seeing and hearing each other online, but creative minds have come up with other new ways to celebrate together while maintaining safe social distances. On Thursday, May 20th, Symone Menefee and her family organized a drive-by parade to celebrate her mom Ava's last chemo session—



—and on the 27th, Dee Armstead and her family celebrated her birthday the same way! Everyone on both these occasions were greatly encouraged by those who could join in the fun without compromising anyone's safety.



With thanks to Symone Menefee and Sherry Rouse for the pictures!

A Memorial Day celebration to remember!

The Brewers' and Emmetts' family group balanced social distance with warm fellowship on Memorial Day weekend. Michelle Brewer said, "We were initially by Gwinnett Medical Center to see the Black Hawk helicopter do a fly-over to honor the veterans on Memorial Day. The picnic photo is at Rhodes Jordan Park. We all brought our own food and had a great time of fellowship." Looks like fun!



Thanks to Sherry Rouse and Michelle Brewer for photos and information!

We welcome news and pictures on interesting personal stories, family group activities, and more. Please send them to Nancy Berry, nberry2@gmail.com. Thank you!

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