

## How I Became an Episcopalian

By Barbara Jane Hardie

I was born into the Methodist Church, little knowing the full significance that Methodism would have on my early life until I was an adult and my mother began to tell stories. First, my great-grandfather, John Stanbury, had started the Methodist Church in Boone, NC, an astounding feat for him, given his illegitimate birth. When he married my Irish schoolteacher great-grandmother, he was illiterate, but she taught him how to read and write, transforming both their lives, as well as the lives of their children, who all went to college, including my grandmother, who also faithfully attended the Boone Methodist Church, as did my mother.

My mother and father were married in the Boone church, and when my father finished his ophthalmology residency at Johns Hopkins, they had to decide where to move. The two top choices were a practice in Johnson City, TN, an hour's drive east from Boone, and a practice in El Paso, TX, also mountainous but desert, where my father's parents lived. According to my mother, my father told her that if she would move to El Paso with him, he would join the Methodist Church. (He had been raised Presbyterian.) My mother said yes, and they eventually joined the downtown Methodist church in El Paso, where Michael and I were married in 1976.

The Methodist Church I grew up in was loving and socially progressive. I was baptized as an infant, to which my two-years-older sister announced that I'd been advertised! I attended kindergarten at the church with an ethnically diverse group of children, American and Mexican, white, brown, Jewish, Arab. My parents taught adult Sunday School, and they hosted the annual Christmas party at our house. I attended the youth group and sang in the choir. One of my memorable choir trips in junior high school was a bus trip to California that took us from the San Diego Zoo up the coastal highway, stopping in Los Angeles and San Francisco, and ending at the Giant Sequoias, before turning south for home. I had taken with me my favorite pair of pants, Aztec print bell bottoms! As the bus made a turn through Haight Ashbury, an infamous hippie neighborhood in San Francisco, I saw a young bearded man who could have been Jesus.

When I was sixteen, my mother experienced a radical Christian conversion, prompted by the similar conversion of her older brother, John. Uncle John, our mother adored him, but the rest of my family had mixed feelings about him, especially my father. Although my father faithfully attended the Methodist Church, he was agnostic. Uncle John had been a heavy drinker and partier. Now he was "born again." This meant, as my sisters and I were quickly learning, that Uncle John was passing on guidance to our mother about limits on all kinds of things--television, parties, dates--no fun.

During the summer of 1974, soon after I graduated from high school, my mother corralled the whole family, including me, my father, my three younger sisters, and my older sister, Becki, into spending a week at a Christian family camp in California called Forest Home. The name sounded like a cemetery. I don't remember much about the camp, except that it came recommended by Uncle John. I do remember attending the final presentation, a thoughtful, well-reasoned argument for the importance of Jesus, presented by an older Scottish Presbyterian man with white hair and a lilting voice. When he gave

an altar-call of sorts, I glimpsed my sister Becki rising from her seat; I too stood and walked to the front, where the Scottish preacher prayed for those of us who had come forward. What had I done? Now Uncle John began to provide guidance to me as well.

That fall, I started at Vanderbilt University in Nashville. Uncle John had encouraged me to find a church, and I dutifully obeyed. On Sunday mornings, I would walk the few blocks to Belmont Church, an energetic, spirit-filled group of 300 or so people who sang much better than the Methodists. I was enthralled. Even better, a new friend, Michael Hudson, was a worship leader at the church. There was only one problem, I discovered, as Christmas break approached. The church didn't sing Christmas carols. How could a Christian church not celebrate Christmas? I would eventually learn more about the Church of Christ, and although Belmont had traveled far from these roots, some of the strange, judgemental practices persisted. For the Church of Christ, the American celebration of Christmas was bastardized beyond recognition.

After Michael and I married, we became heavily involved in the church. We led the youth group and the college group. Michael led singing on Sunday mornings and Wednesday nights. Uncle John wrote letters encouraging me in my faith. My mother made phone calls. We attended an evening spiritual warfare class with Larry Napier, who calmly said with a straight face that the Washington Monument was Satanic.

I was curious and reflective about this strange spiritual experience I was having at Belmont Church, but something stronger began gnawing at me. After a five year hiatus, I had returned to college, this time at Belmont University, majoring in English literature. At twenty-five, I was intellectually hungry, and I consumed the reading, analysis, and writing. I was struck by the role of Christianity in early British Literature, and I noted the passionate poems written to the Virgin Mary. The poets were speaking to her as though she were a kind advocate who would plead to the Father on their behalf. My father, an avid reader, and I began writing letters to one another about our respective texts.

Finally, I reached a tipping point. One Wednesday night, a student at Vanderbilt who was studying theology approached the podium for prayer about his spiritual doubts. The deacon on duty was a postal carrier. He laid his hands on the young man's head and prayed for the "Demon of Intellectualism" to depart, "in Jesus Name," his voice rising. I was both appalled and disturbed. After the service, Michael and I talked about the role of the intellect in faith.

We eventually decided to find another church. We had had several positive encounters with the Episcopal church, including spending the night with an American Episcopal community in Scotland. In high school, I had occasionally accompanied a friend to the Catholic Cathedral in El Paso, where I attended Youth Mass, and I had many friends who attended the Episcopal Church. In Nashville, Michael and I found St. Bartholomew's, a Charismatic Episcopal Church, where we were confirmed in the mid-1980s. Both of us loved the liturgy--the thoughtful, measured words that connected us to centuries of believers. We loved the Eucharist, the weekly banquet that focused on Jesus.

I still love the Episcopal Church. I love its art and its intellect. I love its progressiveness. I love its system of governance, bottom up rather than top down. I love that it rests on a three-legged stool of Scripture,

Tradition, and Reason. I love that it's not a denomination of fear but of inquiry and compassion. I'm currently teaching an Early British Literature course at Southwestern Community College, returning to my early love of those texts and discovering new ones. We can thank Queen Elizabeth, daughter of beheaded Anne Boleyn, for staying a middle course through her 50-year reign as head of the Church of England. There's something about the middle course. Navigating it requires balance, no easy task for any of us. You have to pay attention. Be mindful. Always. But isn't life interesting?