



Atlanta Church of Christ in Gwinnett  
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*The birds of the air come and perch in its branches.  
- Matthew 13:32*

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## *God's growing family in Gwinnett!*

Since our last newsletter, God has adopted four new brothers and sisters into our congregation! On March 26<sup>th</sup>, we celebrated Aria Parks' baptism into Christ—







—and Gregory and Livia Jean were also added to the Body in March! Gregory was immersed in the South River at Oglesby Bridge Road in Conyers on March 23<sup>rd</sup> (below, left), and Livia was baptized at their home in Conyers on the 26<sup>th</sup>. Here are some pictures taken that day via Zoom—







—and Deon McEwen was born again on April 23<sup>rd</sup>.



Then, on May 1<sup>st</sup>, Stephanie McCollum started her new life in Christ—

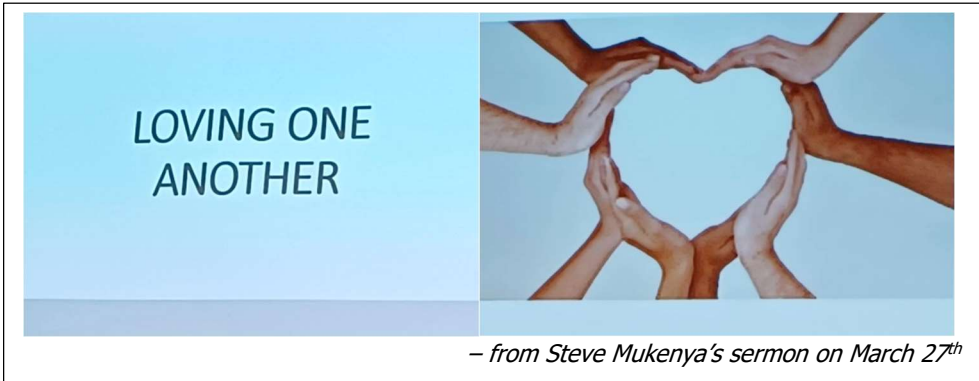






Please keep these young disciples in your prayers as they grow in their new life in Christ, and please look for opportunities to spend some time getting to know them and encouraging them. Never underestimate the power of living out Jesus' call for us to "love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another" (John 13:34b)!

With thanks to Lisa Gunter, Sherry Rouse, Derrick and Michelle Brewer, Julie Fields, and Ina Cook for many of these pictures!



— from Steve Mukanya's sermon on March 27<sup>th</sup>

# Catching up with...



Maya Simms

## **Where are you from originally, and what would you like people to know about where you're from?**

I'm actually a military brat. I was born in Rochester, New York, where my grandmother had settled many years before, and that's where my mom was for the most part raised. But I grew up all over. We spent time in California, Texas, Japan, Virginia, Florida, Illinois, Washington State and Rhode Island, so I've been a little bit of everywhere. I think that's the coolest thing about being a military brat, that it helped me with learning how to make friends quickly. A lot of times, we think of time and moving and people moving on and things like that differently—even in the church, when people have moved, I don't think it affected me the way it did other people, because we were so used to moving. I moved every two and a half to three years of my life until I came here! This is the longest I've ever lived anywhere in my whole life. I've been in the same house now for over 20 years, and it feels weird, like, "Man, isn't it time to move yet? It's been three years!" "Don't unpack that! We'll just have to pack it again"—but no, actually we're not going to have to repack that. I do think that having moved so much and having been so many places it helps me to also appreciate other cultures. It makes me want to move, to travel and see other cultures and things like that, so I think that's the part I loved about it the most, even though there were times when I got the notification to move and I didn't want to in that moment. I don't mind moving, picking up and going, so if God has that in store for me, okay, cool, I'm ready!

## **How did you come to live in the Atlanta area?**

When I was old enough to go to college, my parents were in Japan, so I had to come back stateside—it's a rule, when you're the child of a military family and become college-age, if you're overseas, either you speak that language fluently and can get a visa from the government there so you can stay, or you have to come back. I just happened to get accepted to Savannah State when it was still a college before it became a university. So I was going to school there, and a friend of mine had family here in the Atlanta area, so I came up here with her to visit and I fell in love with the area—we had so much fun! We were in college, so of course we partied a lot, but it was also the people; her dad was a pastor, and so I went to their church that Sunday and I just fell in love with the people. It was the first time that I had ever been anywhere with so many African Americans who were affluent and middle-class, other than in the military. So those things attracted me; I fell in love with the area, and I always wanted to come back. So fast forward, after my tour in the military, I was in Virginia and I met my husband, and we got married. One day we were sitting at the table and said, "Okay, what are we going to do post-military?"—because we had decided that we weren't going to stay in the military, and so we were trying to figure out what we're going to do. And I said, "Well, one area that I've always wanted to go back to is the Atlanta metro area."

We put different locations we were willing to move to in a list, and we just start filling out applications; we said, "Okay, wherever we get a job first, that's where we're going." We got jobs in Atlanta, so that's how we ended up here. We got married in 1998, and moved here in 1999, and then shortly after that I got met by Karen McClerklin, and a couple of years after that I became a disciple, and that's how I ended up here.

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

I kind of feel like my field chose me! The first semester of my senior year of high school, I decided to take an accounting class—I grew up with everybody thinking I was going to become an attorney (because I like to talk), so I thought, "Well, if I'm going to be this high-powered attorney making all this money, I need to know how to manage it!" So I took an accounting class and I realized I actually really like accounting! They started telling me that sometimes when you're an attorney, you can be defending people and find out that they're actually guilty but you still have to defend them, and I thought, "I don't know if I could do that." I think I would have struggled with that. But I took this accounting class and I fell in love with it, and so I just knew that I was going to go into accounting. I think I was the only one in my peer group of friends that never changed their major! I did a double major in accounting and business administration; I also have a master's in accounting and finance, and I'm currently working on a doctorate in business administration, so hopefully within two years I'll have my doctorate in business administration.

When I finished my undergraduate degree, at that point I was already enlisted in the Navy; I finished my time in college and ended up going to Officer Candidate School, so I became an officer in the Navy and did my active-duty tour in the military. I said, "If I'm going to spend my whole life behind a desk, I need to go ahead and travel now!" I did six years in the Navy, and once my contract in the military was coming to an end, I decided to go ahead and start my accounting career. We moved here to Atlanta and I found a position—I had started working on my CPA license right before I finished in the military, and so I am a licensed CPA. I have a small practice currently, and I sub-contract for another CPA as well. My specialty is small businesses and their owners, and then I do tax planning and I do a little bit with real estate investment and things like that.

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

Karen and I met at the Kroger at the lower end of Highway 124, in the produce aisle; she had Ethan in a cart seat—that tells you how long ago this was! Ethan and Nikita were both probably about 9 months old, and Karen saw Nikita and said, "Oh, my gosh, she is so cute!" So we started talking, and she gave me an invitation to a women's day, but it was during tax season and I had to work because I was with a CPA firm that during tax season required us to work half-days Saturdays, so I wasn't able to go. Karen said, "No problem! Just take this card; my number's on it." It was really timely, because we had been here for about a year and a half and I didn't have a church home yet. Back in Virginia where we were coming from, I had a church home and I loved my church, I loved my pastor, but I had not found a church home here yet. Unfortunately, I grew up Catholic and my original church was a Catholic church, and all the scandals about the Catholic Church had just started coming out. So I had been praying for about a year that God would help me find a church home—"Help me find somewhere; it doesn't have to be Catholic church, God, I just need to be somewhere where people love each other"—I just prayed really hard, and so then I met Karen and I started attending church. This was back when there was a Stone Mountain church and we would meet at that church that's across from the Super Walmart off of 78 and Rockbridge, and I started falling in love with the church.

Then one day I had missed service for a couple of weeks or something like that, I was struggling in my marriage, having issues, and I called Karen and said, "Hey, where are you meeting today?"—because I knew that sometimes they changed their meetings. Karen told me, "We're having house church today." I said, "What's that?"—I had never heard of that before! She said, "We just get together at someone's house, and it's smaller groups and it's kind of intimate, and it'll be really cool. Your next-door neighbor is going to be hosting one of the house churches!" I said, "Wait—what?"



Well, okay...." Karen said, "Yeah, go over there and tell her I sent you." So I said "God, please be with me in this," and I went next door, and sure enough it was Donna Lynn! It was really, really crazy because I had actually met her about a year or so before that at church, but I didn't realize she lived next door to me. So we started talking, and come to find out that when Donna and Karl moved in, they had had a little block party, but that week something had happened and we couldn't go. We literally were seeing each other at church, and we lived next door to each other for maybe a little more than a year, and did not know we lived next door to each other! So then after I went to her house church, she asked me if I wanted to do a Bible study, and I said, "Sure, why not?" We started studying the Bible, and that's how I got to be a disciple.

I loved how people in the church would be so open and friendly; you couldn't be a stranger—some churches you go to, you can be going to church for a year and nobody even realizes you're new. But here, if you came in and were new, people reached out to you. They didn't just let it stand and let people come in without greeting them or checking on them.

### **What has surprised you most about life as a disciple?**

It was a pleasant surprise for me that when I was a young disciple the sisters that I was being discipled by, my friends that I kind of was growing up with in the church, when things were hard or challenging, would always bring me back to the scriptures. And I appreciate that so much, because I think that many times in our life we rely on conventional wisdom, and while conventional wisdom can be self-gratifying it doesn't necessarily feed your joy. I remember I was having some kind of issue with my husband one time, and I was venting to one of my friends, just going on and on, and she said, "Maya, um, I'm so sorry that's happening, and you know, you're right, it really shouldn't be this way. But do you think maybe you're struggling a little bit with a little pride?" And I was like, "Wait, what? Didn't I just tell you that he did blah-blah-blah-blah," and she said, "Yeah, I heard you, but I'm just saying, it kinda sounds like maybe—let me give you some scriptures." And I read through them, and it just really helped me to get a different perspective.

It's about managing expectations and then making deliberate choices regarding how we choose to handle different situations. Even if our initial reaction is not the most desirable one, we can choose midway down that road to say, "Oh, dude, I'm going the wrong way; let me turn around." And you turn around and make a different choice. It's okay to do that, there's nothing wrong with that, and I think that I was really blessed with sisters helping me to see that early. I am grateful that I went through a lot of things when I was younger, before becoming a disciple, that helped prepare me to not just embrace, but to seek after that kind of correction, that kind of advice, and even when it came unexpectedly, to be okay, to not get offended. Advice is just advice, and we still have accountability for our decisions. People give advice that is the best they can give based on their perspective and their experience; but the decision-making is always still mine, to make a decision I can live with. My parents were in the military and I was in the military, where self-accountability is big—you have to be accountable for the decisions you make.

I was really grateful for the advice; I was surprised, because it was probably the first time somebody talked to me about my pride. That was also really different from the world, because of course my girlfriends in the world would talk about how "He shouldn't be doing that," about what it was he was doing that made me feel like I needed to react a certain way, not about what I was doing. And I think that's what helped me also to eventually grow to the point that now, I think I'm much more measured when I react; I've accepted certain things. I'm Team Spock, my husband is Team Kirk, and I've accepted that. He's super-emotional, and I'm super, like, "Okay, how logical is that? Can you help me understand how to make sense of it?" I'm usually measured and he's usually spontaneous. We're the exact opposite of most couples. When we go to the mall as a family, I'm the one who's usually sitting on the benches outside of the stores working on my phone or on the computer, and my daughters are inside with their dad.

I hate shopping. I've taken enough marketing classes to know that, where you see a chair, I see somebody's home in the Bahamas. It's made some company whose owners are millionaires or billionaires, and I just see their house in the Caymans, I don't see a chair. Marketing is people telling you what they think you need. I don't like people telling me what to do anyway—what I should buy and how much I need their stuff, when I know that I don't need their stuff. I love that on Amazon I can go exactly to what I need and have it sorted by price, and then I can pick the one I want and I'm done, so that's why I generally shop online.

### **What is the biggest lesson you've learned as a disciple that continues to help you?**

Even though I have great friendships and great relationships in the Body, the scriptures still have to be my first resource. Sometimes that can be, if I'm just at a total loss, letting somebody know, "Hey, this is why I'm struggling with—can you give me some scriptures?" The Bible has to be my first resource for helping me to get through the things that I'm dealing with. There'll be times when I'm struggling or I'm going through stuff, and my friend can't help me because they've got their own stuff they're dealing with, and I have to be conscious of that. I can't make humans my foundation; my foundation still has to be the scriptures. And I think that's hard, because there are times when we're going through stuff where, "Why aren't my friends available?"—and I think we need to recognize that we're putting our faith in people when we do that, putting expectations on them that they can't live up to, because they can't be perfectly available to us all the time.

Embracing things is great, but we need to seek after it—seeking God's way to do things and how to handle things in a godly way. That's something that that when I was studying the Bible and then also after I became a disciple, that was really impressed upon me and I'm really grateful for that because even when my friends are not available, God is.

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

God is looking for progress, not perfection! I think too many times people think, "Oh, that's too hard! I can't do it!" Well, yeah, you're right! It's too hard, and you can't do it—*you* can't, *I* can't! I do it wrong all day, every day, all the time! But God didn't ask me to do it perfectly; He just asks me to show up and be willing and open, and if I can do that, and really seek the Holy Spirit and God's way of doing things, that's all I've got to do. When I'm in a situation where I'm so angry or so upset or so hurt that I can't even wrap my own self around how to handle this the right way, all I've got to do is call on the Holy Spirit and just show up. God will take care of the rest of it if I just hold on to those two things, just let Him handle His part and I handle my part.

The other thing is that God is not a genie. You don't make wishes and things go well just because you're a disciple. I think my kids think, "If I'm doing everything right, then everything should go well." I try to help them understand that you're going to go through a whole lot of crap and have some really horrible, insidious, grotesque and awful things happen to you—you can choose to do it by yourself, or you can choose do it with God: that is actually the way that it works.

When we did the study three or four weeks ago about Joseph, I broke it down to somebody like this: "Okay, Joseph was in Potiphar's house and he was doing everything right. He increased Potiphar's profits—Potiphar went from being a millionaire to a multi-millionaire under Joseph's tenure. And as he was doing everything right, he gets arrested and goes to jail for sexual assault. So imagine your child has made straight As and is doing everything right; they've got scholarships to go to college, they've got all this stuff going for them. And the po-po show up at your door to arrest your child for sexual assault, which they did not commit. But you've got no way to prove they didn't commit that sexual assault, and this person has what they feel is genetic proof to show that he was there. Never mind the fact that they didn't commit this sexual assault, that doesn't matter; all the evidence has been lined up against him, and now your son's about to go to jail for 15 years. Please help me understand how you would not feel like you're being punished even though you're doing everything right."

I think that for my kids that's the hard part for them to understand, that although God could control it all, He doesn't. He chooses not to. And yes, that's hard, especially when you're dealing with sexual assault, rape, incest, child molestation—you start dealing with really hard topics like that, it's hard to accept that a good God would not prevent those things from happening. But the reality is that humans do a lot of really horrible stuff to each other, and if you want to get rid of all those things you have to get rid of all the



humans; as long as one of us is around, there's the potential for that kind of stuff to happen. So that being said, we can choose to either go through those hard things with God or without Him. In my lifetime I have found it's so much harder without Him than it is with Him.

I think that if people could figure out those two things and embrace those two things—God is not looking for perfection from you, He's looking for progress, and being a Christian is not a get-out-of-jail-free card. It doesn't mean you're not going to go through stuff; it doesn't mean that bad things are not going to happen to you. It just means that God is going to walk with you as you go through it, and I think those are hard things to accept, unfortunately—and not everybody can.

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

I think my biggest challenge has to have been dealing with my husband—not necessarily in a bad way. As most people know, my husband is not a disciple, but again back to the idea of managing expectations, especially when you're a new disciple—people quote 1 Peter 3 where it talks about if your spouse is not a disciple, then they can be won over by your behavior. I think that unfortunately that puts God in a transactional position: "If I do this, then God will do that," and that's not actually how it works. That person's walk is their walk, and they may choose to never walk with God. And then the question is, "Ok, where do we stand with that? How are we going to get to a place as disciples to be okay with people we love not becoming disciples—and not only not becoming disciples, but deciding that God is not there, that Jesus is not our savior, things we think of as fundamental Christian concepts, how are we going to deal with the realization that we have family members who we love dearly who not only haven't decided but may never choose God?" We need to manage that expectation and understand that that's their decision. It's really hard, especially when you feel like you've done everything you can to help them see the truth. It makes me struggle that my kids don't believe in God, that they are okay with alternative lifestyles; it upsets me that my husband doesn't believe in God, he believes in a higher power. It upsets me that almost everybody in my household curses on a regular basis in my presence, and it just makes me nuts.

It can be really lonely at times; I'm literally the only disciple in my whole family. My father is Buddhist (raised Baptist, but he's Buddhist) and one of my three brothers is Buddhist too; the other two are agnostic, and my sister is agnostic or maybe atheist. And no amount of my faith is going to make them anything other than what they choose to be. I can share my faith and I can love them and I can try my best to always show Christ in the way that I choose to act towards them and react to them, but that doesn't change that that's their choice.

People choose to react based on the things that have happened in their lives—very hard things that have happened to them or to people that they love—and figuring out how to be okay despite how different my reaction can be versus how they react, I think that part is hard. Stories in the Bible help me – my absolute favorite character is Joseph; I just constantly remind myself that it was 30-something years between when he had the vision and when it came to fruition. My oldest is 21, and Joseph had 30-something years, so there's always hope that things will change. I think stories of other people who have overcome certain situations and addictions and lifestyles and whatever, those are encouraging.

A sister told me one time that she came from a family where reverent respect for elders was very heavily impressed upon her, so it was sometimes difficult for her to share her faith with her mom because she felt like she was correcting her mom. But when her mom got older and started getting sick, this sister made a decision that she was just going to enjoy her mom while she had her, for however long God decided to let her have her. She decided to just love her, and if the little bit of love that she was able to give her mom was going to be all the love that her mom was ever going to be able to experience, she wanted to make sure that she did it right. I think that sometimes that's how we have to look at it: if my kid never becomes a disciple, never goes to heaven, I need to let them experience as much love as humanly possible right now, because this is all the love they're going to get. I need to make sure that I'm giving them absolutely all that I can give. I believe that when I die, the love that I'm going to get when I go to heaven is going to overshadow anything that I've had here on Earth, so the people in my life that I love that are not going to get that, I need to make it as big and good as possible, because this is it for them.

I try to be very open about my life, because I'm a lot closer to the end of my time on this Earth than I am to my beginning, so I don't really have the time nor the capacity for all the small talk, talking about the weather, anymore. It is so much easier to just be real with people, and it's more efficient. I know there's a

lot of people that I've met over the years who wondered, "What's the catch?" There's really no catch, because honestly, I don't have the energy to put that much into trying to manipulate people and so because I don't have the energy to manipulate people, I just am, and it just is what it is.

### **What's your favorite scripture?**

My all-time favorite is Isaiah 43:1-7—I put my own name in it, and my most favorite part is verse 2, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze"—which got me through a lot of really, really, really hard times when I just felt like, "This is over, I'm just not gonna make it." My second favorite is 1 Corinthians 13:4-13, which is, of course, the definition of love—"Love is patient, love is kind...."

### **What do you enjoy doing in your spare time?**

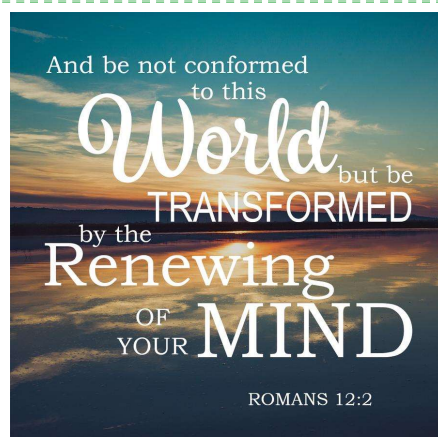
I like to sew; I like doing crafty stuff. I like painting—not artistic painting, but painting-my-walls painting, doing home repair stuff and anything that does not require me to think, because my job requires so much intellectual stuff.

### **What might someone be surprised to know about you?**

When I was in college, I did body building, and was going to compete—I never actually competed because I got accepted into the Navy program that I wanted to go into, and it was time for me to leave. My siblings are all bodybuilders and powerlifters; it's weird—all of them are into extreme sports. My sister and my sister-in-law both hold powerlifting titles, and one of my brothers has won a couple of bodybuilding competitions And I actually did sailing; I used to sail the smaller one-man, two-man boats in the Navy.

### **If you could speak to yourself as you were 10 years ago, what advice would you give yourself?**

I don't know! I am a strong believer in building blocks, so I feel like all the stupid stuff that I did before was building blocks for where I am now, and if I didn't go through those things, that I would be dumber than I am now. I feel like I kind of needed that—the stuff that you go through, it's how you become. I feel that if I told myself 20 years ago, "Okay, here's all the things you need to know about your future self, and all the stuff you're going to go through with your spouse and with your kids," I would have been like, "Heck, no, we're not doing that!" And I would have just been ghost, I would have been gone. There are different decisions I would have made if I had known then what I know now, but on the flip side, would I be as strong in my faith as I am now? Probably not. Would I have the friends I have now? Probably not. Like Judy—I wouldn't be as close to Judy as I am if certain things hadn't happened in my family that I then needed her help with, to be able to talk through things. I feel like it's all building blocks. Some things you just are gonna have to go through in order to really understand it, because you can say what you would have done if you came across some situation, but when you're in the situation, the way you actually react to it is often really different. Even if I would have told myself, "This is going to happen if you marry this person," I don't know if I necessarily would have believed it. I don't know if there's anything I could have told myself that would have made things different for the better.





## Welcome, Mikhail & Ericka!



Mikhail and Ericka Krevosky are now part of the AcoCG ministry staff! Early this spring they got in touch with Harold McCurdy with an interest in ministry openings here in Georgia. Our leadership team talked with them about leading our campus ministry and helping with our singles ministry, and the interest continued to grow on both sides. They came from California in late April to interview and to meet the church; after getting input from the congregation and taking time to seek God's guidance, we offered them the ministry position, and they accepted! We look forward to getting to know this loving, spiritual couple more and more as they settle into life in Georgia. We're so grateful for how God "equip[s] his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:12-13)!

## Celebrating summer, with all its sun, storms and fireworks!



Ah, summer! We look forward to vacations, family time, traveling, holidays, cookouts and get-togethers of all kinds—while some welcome the heat, others appreciate the air conditioning and relish the cooler temperatures at night. Although the weather can change quickly (and unexpectedly, whatever the meteorologists might predict), remember that we walk every day with the God who "covers the heavens with clouds; he prepares rain for the earth; he makes grass grow on the hills...the LORD takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love." (Psalm 147:8, 11)  
"...our Lord is above all gods...He it is who makes the clouds rise at the end of the earth, who makes lightnings for the rain and brings forth the wind from his storehouses." (Psalm 135:5b, 7) Amen!

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

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