



# 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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## Celebrating the holidays together!



The daytime women's fellowship and study group held its potluck Christmas brunch at Sue McGarr's home on December 9<sup>th</sup>. The warm fellowship and delicious food added wonderful flavor to the holidays!

Take a look—



With thanks to Cathy Frazier for help with pictures!

# Catching up with...



Christina Stuart

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

I'm from New York, specifically Dix Hills; it's on Long Island, about 30-40 minutes from Manhattan, New York City. I grew up in the suburbs there, then I went to school in Boston, so I spent 11 years there before moving to Atlanta. My parents still live in Long Island; my aunt lives in the house I grew up in, and my sister recently moved into her own place in Brooklyn.

There are things that I hold onto to this day, things I so easily took for granted that I appreciate now that I no longer live close to New York—great pizza, great bagels.... I love musicals, so being able to go see Broadway shows—there's lots to do, and even though I didn't grow up in the busyness of the city, I was close enough to still be able to see everything. Seeing New York City at Christmas time was normal for me—I liked being able to go see like the tree at Rockefeller Center. Those are things I really enjoy—especially at this time of year, it's fun being in New York.

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

I mentioned that I lived in Boston for 11 years; I originally moved there for college—I went to MIT, that was actually where I was met and baptized, in the campus ministry there. I majored in computer science and engineering. After spending four years in college there, I graduated, and to be honest I was scared to go anywhere else, so I just stayed. I felt like the very safe, comfortable choice was to just stay where I was—that's where I became an adult, that's where all my relationships were at the time. After I graduated, I joined the singles ministry, and had great fun times, challenging times. And then after seven or eight years of living in Boston, the majority of my closest relationships—the top five or six people—all moved out of Boston for varying reasons in, like, a six-month span. That was really hard! I think after that I was grieving—not like I lost-lost them, some of those friends I still keep up with today, but at that point I was trying to think, "OK, do I want to still stay here, or do I want to go somewhere else?" But I was not really sure where to go. And once COVID hit, at the start of 2020, I was living with five roommates, and it was fine when everyone was not home; when everyone was home it started to get a little more stressful, so I decided to try living by myself.

So in July of 2020 I moved into an apartment by myself, thinking also that we would go back to normal, but a few months later.... But I'm grateful for that time, being able to look at my mental and emotional needs, just think more about what I wanted to do without being bombarded by the five other people I lived with. So when my job at the time announced that basically anyone could work remotely, that was when I was like, "OK, if I don't have to stay in Boston for my job, where would I go?" That was when I started more seriously to think about it—because at any other time before that, I thought, "Oh, I'm not really gonna move; I really like my job, I'm not ready to move yet."

I landed on Atlanta mainly because it was outside of the Northeast, so it'd be somewhere I hadn't lived before—yes, New York and Boston are two different cities, but they are more similar to each other than they are to all the other major cities in the US, so this was just an opportunity for me to go somewhere that's actually different from where I lived in my entire life. At the same time it was this nice balance of having a fresh start while already having some relationships—I had a few friends that were already living in Atlanta, and then I had an aunt and uncle and a few other extended family members moved here since I've been here, and so I at least had some connections with people, instead of just moving to a brand new city where I knew absolutely no one. I was just feeling stuck living in Boston for so long, and really just needed a change, just to try something different. So I moved here in July of 2021, so it's been like four and a half years.

### **What do you do for a living? How did you choose that field?**

I am a software engineer at Google. I really like math, so when I went to college, I originally thought I was going to major in math. In my freshman year, I took a class in multivariable calculus with theory, and I hated it—it was too theoretical for me, and I thought, "I can't do this for the next three and a half years!" I struggled to get through that one semester. I also took a computer science class while I was in high school, and I remembered that, and ended up taking an intro computer science class my freshman year, and then I took the next level after that, and so I was like, "Oh, I like how there are a lot of applications for math that use the same problem-solving skills without it being pure math. And this seems fun, and way more practical, and tactile—I can actually write things versus having to prove things." I really enjoy the problem-solving of computer science.

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

As I mentioned, I was met while at MIT; some disciples in the campus ministry were just sharing their faith on campus and inviting people to a Bible discussion, and that's how I was met. Someone I did not know just stopped me while I was on campus and invited me to the next Bible discussion. So I think for me it was like, "Yeah, sure!" It wasn't something that was weird because we were constantly inviting other people on campus to whatever was happening. I grew up going to church, and so it wasn't like a foreign thing to go to some sort of Bible study or Bible discussion type thing, and I'd been to other ones on campus before, so I was just curious—"OK, sure, I'll check it out, see how it goes."

One of the things that really stood out to me when I was at those Bible discussions was seeing how much people loved one another; it just seemed like they were actually friends with each other, versus what I had experienced before, like, "Oh, yeah, we go to the same church, but we're not really friends with each other—we'll say hi, very surface-level, but like, 'Yay, you're here.'" But seeing people enter the room and the way people reacted, that was real, that was something I took note of. And during the discussion itself, just hearing the way people would share about their lives and the way it relates to the Bible, was very different from how I grew up. I'd hear people talk about going to church but at the same time it always felt like church was a separate thing, like, "I have my life, and church is on the other side," and they weren't really one and the same. So hearing people actually really think and apply the things in the scriptures to their lives—I hadn't really seen people talk like that before, in a genuine way. Some people say the right answers and then do something completely different, where it's just like, "OK, who are you trying to impress," right? But that was not what I saw in those Bible discussions.

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

There are so many things that have surprised me! But honestly, I think it's how simple it is to follow God, to follow Jesus—and really hard at the same time. I think back to studying the Bible, and conversations around, "Are you reading your Bible and praying?" Your faith and your walk with God really come down to those two things. But I think in so many different ways we have to go and make it all complicated, but the simplicity is also what makes it so hard. These things can sound simple, but actually believing them is the hard part.

I think going back to the foundations and the simplicities of faith is really what helps you endure, to last a long time. A lot of surprises come down to people I thought had really strong faiths or walks with God who decided to just walk away—I can't say specifically if they walked away from God or just from the church, but they walked away, and there are several people that I never thought would do that. So much of it is just that you're not necessarily going to always get what you want, everything isn't going to go perfectly according to your plan the way you want, yet God is still consistent and true through all of it.

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

I think it's been my busyness. Every time I'm reading the scriptures about the different soils and the seeds, where one of the seeds lands within the thorns and the busyness of life but I think that's the concern for me. It's so easy to get caught up in my checklist for the day—"Here's what I need to do"—forgetting where God fits into all of this. I feel like it's learning in different ways how to manage my busyness; I think about my earlier days as a disciple, making sure I was reading my Bible and praying every day—and then that started to feel more like a checklist, and so yes, I'm doing it but I don't really feel connected in doing it. So that led to figuring out different ways of reading and praying and learning how I can still connect to God in a way that's not just what I was doing—incorporating spiritual books, or listening to podcasts, but also going on prayer walks and learning to journal-pray, or praying out loud, or praying with other people. There's just this vast range of ways to connect with God that can be by yourself but also in communities.

As I mentioned, it's a challenge just keeping a check on my busyness; I think right now, for the last few years, it's helped having a bit more grace, knowing that there are going to be some days where I mess up and that's OK. It's, "How am I going to find just a few minutes to pray, to read something, to connect with God?"—even though it may not be the same way day to day. I don't have know that I have *The Golden Book* answer of, "This is what I did, and it works!" But I think the biggest lesson I'm learning right now is just take each day one day at a time—"God, what do I need today?" If today's the day that I need two hours of sitting and praying and reading my Bible, then I'll make that work; or if today I don't know if I can find 20 minutes, then okay—and not beating myself up so much about, "Oh, crap, I didn't read and pray for an hour." So I think my challenge is managing my busyness, not forgetting that God is still there—whether I am reading my Bible or not, He's still in everything that I do. I can do things that are actively connecting me with God; throughout my day, just being able to be reminded that I'm not doing this alone—God is still here.

### **What is your favorite scripture?**

Romans 12:1-2: "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will." To me it's a reminder of my purpose and identity, especially in Christ. At work I'm a software engineer; I'm someone's roommate; I have all these different roles that I love—but being reminded not only who I am and my purpose, but of God's power. He is able to use me and guide me in a way that is so much bigger than who I am and what I can imagine. Verse 2 is really my favorite part of this; it's a reminder but also a call to be different from the way the rest of the world is, because it can be easy to just be part of the world, but God calls you to be distinct from the world. It's just wrapped up in my purpose and who I am.

### **What do you enjoy doing in your spare time—interests, hobbies, organizations you belong to?**

I have plenty of hobbies, whether or not they are currently active these days—I love going on walks; I'm a big Disney fan, so I love watching all the Disney TV shows and movies that come out, and going to Disney World. This past year I haven't gotten to go very often, but usually I'll go two or three times a year.

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

I grew up playing violin for 10 years, though I don't play anymore. But people might be surprised that I'm musical—I grew up doing lots of music; I went to a performing arts summer camp for music and dancing, I would major in violin and minor in tap.

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

10 years ago would be a year or two after college, so I think my advice would be to embrace all the things, to try new things, try different things. Things may not always go according to plan, and that's OK! I've spent the last 10 years learning that at the end of the day you can't control other people, can't control what you wish somebody would do. You can't get caught up in "Are they going to do this, are they going to do that?" It's, "What are you going to do about it?"

# "Still Holding On" and still bringing joy!

Our Christmas presentation this year, "Still Holding On," continued the story begun in Melissa Viveiros' 2023 play "Holding On." This sequel focused on Jordan (played by Joshua Britt), as he wrestled with trusting God enough to forgive past hurts, a challenge sparked by an outreach from his estranged father Carl (played by Jerome Tench). His friends and allies in this struggle are Xiomara (Melissa Alequín-Viveiros, who also directed), Rita (Andrea Tench), Frank (Ralph Viveiros), Tyler (James Jackson), and Omar (Sammy Calloway). The play began with a flashback showing a young Jordan (played by Langston Large) with his mother Mary (Dorci Richards), and incorporated two heartfelt Christmas carols sung by our children's group (led by Ron Frazier) and a soulful hymn sung by Sharon Ross, as well as a moment's pause to remember Grub Smith, who contributed his heart, spirit, and skills to every Christmas presentation and many other CoCG events until he passed away last spring. Here are some moments captured both backstage and on-stage that December morning—



With thanks to Kes Robinson and Cathy Frazier for help with pictures!





The backstage crew



Every individual involved with the Christmas presentation, from the writing and direction to the light, sound, curtain and props crews, to the actors and singers, gave their hearts and minds and energies sacrificially to make it the best it could be, and the results were heartwarming, moving and memorable!  
Thanks to everyone who served in every way!



## *Just a note...*

...to remind everyone about the best ways to help others through our congregation's food pantry. So many people—disciples, their families and friends—continue to benefit from the generosity of every one of us who contributes shelf-stable goods and grocery gift cards to the pantry.

When the shelves need re-filling, the Berrys bring a large signboard covered in sticky notes; each sticky note specifies an item we are low on or out of in the pantry, so we can keep a steady supply of basic essentials available whenever they'll come in handy to stretch someone's budget or help them through a tight financial time.

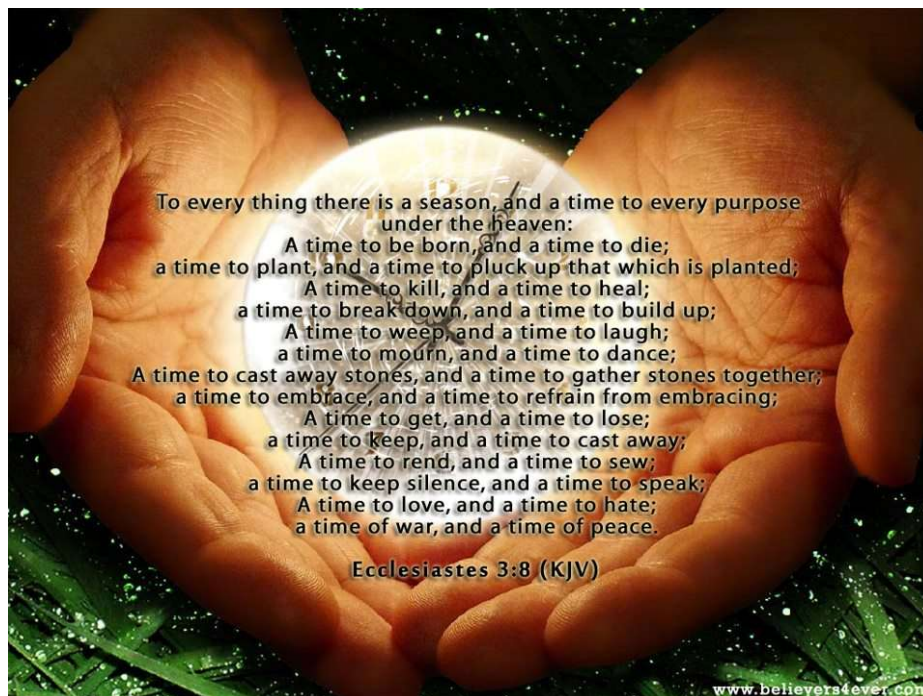
We don't have any refrigerator or freezer connected with the pantry, so we can only accept shelf-stable items—unfortunately, we cannot keep fresh fruits or vegetables, bread or other bakery items, dairy, meats, etc. To fill those needs, we try to keep grocery gift cards on hand, so people can buy their own fresh products, as well as using the gift cards for fuel to get where they need to go.

What Jesus taught us in Matthew 7:12, "treat people the same way you want them to treat you," applies to how we help those around us, including through the pantry. You may have been the one in need of help yourself, but if that hasn't been your experience, just imagine yourself in those shoes.

Would you appreciate being offered someone's leftovers and random rejects, opened and partially used boxes or bags, food items that have already expired? If you wouldn't find those kinds of grocery items appealing, you can be sure no one coming to the pantry would appreciate them either.

By giving others the same kinds of things we would be grateful for if we were on the receiving end, we honor Jesus and serve Him: "...Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me." (Matthew 25:40)

Thank you again for your generous and willing hearts—and let's keep it going!



To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose  
under the heaven:  
A time to be born, and a time to die;  
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted;  
A time to kill, and a time to heal;  
a time to break down, and a time to build up;  
A time to weep, and a time to laugh;  
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;  
A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together;  
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;  
A time to get, and a time to lose;  
a time to keep, and a time to cast away;  
A time to rend, and a time to sew;  
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;  
A time to love, and a time to hate;  
a time of war, and a time of peace.

Ecclesiastes 3:8 (KJV)

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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