

## Larry Nielsen's Spiritual Journey

*Larry has served as an Elder since 2005. He came to First Christian after moving into the area in 2003. Larry's wife, Teri, met several ladies from FCC on an Emmaus Walk and suggested they visit. Larry and Teri live in West Harrison. Their children, Emily and Ethan, live in the Cincinnati area. Larry is retired from the Hamilton County Sheriff's Department, where he served as the Patrol Section Commander. He regularly serves in the Jail Ministry, Believers Behind Bars correspondence ministry, and the Crown of Glory nursing home ministry. Larry is a licensed minister and serves on staff as Director of Small Groups Ministries. Favorite Scripture: Acts 2:42-47.*



I don't know why God has been so good to me.

I was raised in a comfortable, two-parent home and received a good education. I've been happily married to a wonderful woman for 32 years. I was very successful in my chosen career and was able to retire at age 50.

Most of my life, by the world's standards, I had it all. But by God's standards, I was as lost as the most pathetic derelict on skid row. My belief was merely an intellectual acknowledgement of God's existence--it had nothing to do with how I conducted my life, made decisions, or established relationships. I thought I could live my life alongside God, like two trains going the same direction on separate tracks. Like millions of people in our culture today, I was a good, honest, industrious, moral person. But I was still lost.

Toward the end of my career I finally acknowledged that I was missing God in my life. I started reading the Bible, and the Holy Spirit immediately went to work in my life. Terri and I started attending a large non-denominational church. The Alpha class was offered there, and I was saved during that course.

I began to feel a strong pull to do something for God. I retired from my career and began seeking God's will for the rest of my life. The first thing I tried was fishing in the Florida Keys. Sadly, that wasn't it. I filled my days doing volunteer work at church and working part-time at a Christian bookstore. One day at church, I talked with a lady and the subject of my past job with the sheriff's department came up. She said, "You know, we have a jail ministry here; we could use someone with your background." I smiled politely, and said I'd think about it. What I was really thinking was, not in this lifetime, lady. You see, I had retired as commander of the sheriff's patrol section. I had spent my adult life putting people in jail. I didn't like the people there.

About a week later at the bookstore, an old friend came in. He had been a police chaplain and had ridden with me when I was a patrol officer. Now he was head of the Justice Chaplaincy in greater Cincinnati. We caught up on old times, and as he was leaving, he asked me where I went to church. When I told him, he said, "You know they've got a jail ministry there; you ought to consider it." I thought that was an odd coincidence, and I also thought, you've got to be kidding! Several days later, I was assisting a customer in selecting a Bible. He was a complete stranger. We talked for about ten minutes about Bible versions, books, prayer and other things. After he had selected a suitable Bible, we shook hands and he headed toward the checkout. After taking a few steps, he turned, looked me in the eye and said, "You'd be a good man to be in jail ministry." He walked away, and I've never seen him since.

I knew from the Alpha class that God sometimes uses other people to deliver His message. I had been told three times in two weeks by three different people—an acquaintance, a friend, and a stranger—that I should be in jail ministry. I knew that God was not only speaking to me, but He was being pretty insistent about it. I surrendered at that point and joined the prison ministry at church.

The first time I went into the jail as an ambassador of Jesus Christ, I felt the presence of the Holy Spirit and immediately knew that this was where God wanted me. I've since learned how profoundly fortunate I am to have God's will for my life revealed so clearly. And I still find it amazing that, as Paul wrote in Ephesians 3:8, "Unto me, the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ."

I stayed with that ministry for two years. It began to languish through poor leadership and lack of pastoral support. I was frequently the only person who showed up for our assignments. Considering that the church had an average weekend attendance of 6000, one person is a pretty poor showing.

About that time, we moved to the Harrison area, and my wife was invited on the Walk to Emmaus. On her walk she met several wonderful people from First Christian Church, and she suggested that we visit. We began splitting time between the two churches. I enrolled in a lay chaplain's course, planning to leave the other church and start an independent jail ministry. We were drawn more and more toward First Christian, because of the true, loving community feeling that we found there. We became members, and I approached Dr. McConnell about starting a jail ministry at First Christian. I didn't know what to expect, but I reasoned that if the worst happened, it was somehow better to be a one-man jail ministry in a church of 300 than to be a one-man jail ministry in a church of 6000. Dr. McConnell immediately embraced the idea, and told me that he had been praying for this type of ministry at First Christian for years. He supported this ministry from the pulpit, and the participation response from the members was overwhelming.

Since that time, I have had the honor of becoming an elder and volunteer staff member at First Christian. In January of this year we started a national prison correspondence ministry, called "Believers Behind Bars," and God has allowed us, as a church, to have an influence in the lives of imprisoned men and women all over the United States.

It's very exciting to be a part of this church and to see God moving in all our ministries. I have no doubt that as long as prayer and servanthood are at the heart of what we do, we will continue to see miracles worked in our church. I can't wait to see what challenges and opportunities God has in store for us in the future.

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