

Sam Scaggs 2024 03 07

Alan: I don't remember things. I never did anyway, and the older I get, the worse it is. What I'd like to do is get your story from showing up at Mount Pleasant, or why you showed up there, all the way through, and you know, whatever you would care to share.

Sam: Sure.

Alan: Written for posterity.

Sam: Well, yeah, for me, I was a teenager, I think, when I first started attending Mount Pleasant, and I was seeing Bev at first, then we broke off because I wasn't a believer, and she was, and it wasn't working. And then I had a turning point in my life where I really felt like I needed some help spiritually, and she was the only one that I really, other than my grandmother who lived in Indiana, she was the only one nearby that I could talk to about this. So I told her, I said, look, I don't want a date, I just would like to talk with you, and go to church, and it doesn't have to be Mount Pleasant, and if you don't want me to go with you there, we can go somewhere else, but she, of course, wanted me to go to Mount Pleasant. And it wasn't too long after that, a couple months after that, I went with her to hear Eastern Mennonite High School Choir at...it was in Newport News, it was the one that the Showalter, Gerald Showalter was at. Huntington. Huntington, and it was completely filled that night, and I went in with her, and we were supposed to go out with some friends of hers afterwards for pizza or something.

And so I went, thinking, okay, there's no preaching, it's just singing, and didn't know much about it. And during the singing, though, they had, the Choir Director, J Hartzler had always had people share their testimonies, and so a guy named Burl Jantzi was a junior at high school at EMHS, shared his story, that he had kind of wandered away from the Lord, but had recently come back, and that God had really spoke to him, and he'd had this encounter with God. And I was like, wow, I wish I could have an encounter with God.

A lot of things had happened prior to that, because I had been arrested, I was in, there was no room at the detention home, so they put me in the city jail, I was on parole.

Alan: What were you arrested for?

Sam: I was an entrepreneur. I used to sell a lot of marijuana. And I got caught.

Alan: Ahead of your time.

Sam: Yeah, I was ahead of my time. It was good business. Anyway, I got caught, and was on parole, and while I was in jail, in the Chesapeake City jail, a chaplain by the name of Jerry Adams came in and began to speak to me. And he was pivotal, because Bev shared the gospel with me, but I always felt like it was my...I had to do it. I had to

change under my own volition and power and strength, and become religious. And Jerry really helped me to sort out that religion isn't what it is at all, it's a personal relationship with God, and instead of you coming to God and forcing religion, you really need to let go and give God the throne of your heart. Well, nobody had ever explained it to me quite that clear, and it was a bit shocking.

And that's what shook me when I got out, I started calling Bev. And so that night, I heard a voice say to me, if you would give me one chance with your life, I'm going to change everything. I'm going to change your complete trajectory of your life.

So I thought, I'm having a nervous breakdown. This is what happens when you do drugs. I really thought it was, and I asked Bev, I said, did you hear that? And she said no, and it was quiet, because it was in between songs. And I'm hearing this voice talking to me.

Alan: A literal voice?

Sam: Not out loud that anybody could hear.

Alan: But in your mind.

Sam: But it was in my heart, but it was so strong, I thought for sure she heard it. And I didn't have any... I had no church background. I'd never opened the Bible. I knew my grandmother was a Christian. My grandfather preached, was a pastor, but we were only home for short visits. So I literally had no peg in my head to hang it on. And it kept on and on and on. And I was like, man, I'm having a nervous breakdown.

So that was what I thought. I thought I'm having a nervous breakdown. I thought this is what happens when you do all the bad things that I had done. So when the lights came on and they all started mingling and visiting, I just took off. I just walked right out of the sanctuary. I went to the car and sat in the car.

And she came and says, are you okay? And I said, let's just go. But I thought we were going to go with my friends and get pizza. I was like, no, I don't think I can do that. I really would like to go. So she went to tell them that we weren't coming. Got back to the car. She thought I was mad. She thought I was angry about something. I was just freaking out. And I thought if I tell her, she's going to think I'm a nutcase. So we drove without talking all the way back from Newport News to... I was taking her home. My car was at her house.

And instead of driving into Wenger Road, I drove up and pulled into the parking lot of the church under that big tree that's right there by the cemetery. And as soon as I pulled the emergency brake up, I just lost it. I mean, I cried like I had not cried my entire life.

I've been taught my whole life men don't show their emotions. Men don't cry. And men don't especially ever show their emotions in front of somebody. So she's sitting right there in the car, and I start praying. And I don't even know how I knew what to pray. I just said, God, I'm a sinner. I don't know why you're talking to me. I don't know what to say to you, but I don't want to live this way anymore. And so Bev

started crying, and she started praying.

And I said, why are you praying? She said, I just wanted to pray with you. And so then we were there for about an hour and then drove back to her house. And her parents had been up in Harrisonburg and came in.

She got out of the car and said, my dad will be able to help with this. Do you mind talking to him? I said, no. So she got out of the car. I heard them talking. Twyla and her went on in the house, and Harold came and got in the front seat of the car. And he was a master at leading people to Jesus, explaining salvation, explaining everything and what's next and how to do it. I mean, he launched right in.

Well, two weeks prior to that, one of the other things that set me up was not only Jerry Adams, but two weeks prior to that meeting, Bev's dad came to his own... He can tell you the story, but he came to his own encounter with God about me because he thought I was out of the picture when we didn't see each other for quite some time. And then all of a sudden, out of the blue, I called her.

And he knew from her that I had been in jail, and here I am back in her life. And so he thinks this is all about dating and taking his baby girl. And so he was never really very warm to me. Twyla was very warm. Eddie and Linda were very accepting. But when I'd come to the house, he was as cold as ice.

I mean, never unkind to me, but just... And I didn't blame him. You know, it was his baby girl. And he would sit in the corner with the paper, and I'd say, "Hello, Mr. Buckwalter." And he'd go, "Hello, Sam." And just put the... Well, he was out waiting for a ship to come in. And his story is... this was two weeks prior to that night at Huntington.

He was sitting at the pier, and he said, God and him began to have a conversation about me. And he told God how upset he was that I was back in Beverly's life.

And God just said, "Why don't you love him?"

And he said, "What?"

And He goes, "Why don't you love him? Why don't you love him the way you love these men that you're waiting to come in on the ship and you take to your house and you feed them and golf with them and take them shopping?"

And he says, You know why? Because he's dating my daughter. They're not dating my daughter." Next thing you know, Dad said he just started weeping.

And so he picks up the phone and calls Twyla. Twyla picks up the phone and calls Beverly at work. Beverly picks up the phone and calls me at the shipyard. I'm working at the shipyard now. I'd finished high school and was working down there. And she said, "Dad's taking us out to dinner tonight."

And I said, "I know what this dinner's about. I said, I don't need a dinner to tell me to get lost.

And she goes, "No, I don't think that's it. Mom said, Something's happening."

I said, "Beverly, come on. Let's just not do this. I really don't have the emotional energy." Because I was really quite exhausted about my emotional life where I was at. Because I was lost. I had come to the end of myself.

Anyway, long story short, she talked me into it. So I come over there. We get in the back seat of Harold and Twyla's car. Twyla doesn't even know what's going on. He hadn't told anybody the story. And so he backs out of the car, puts the mirror down.

Bev and I are in the back seat. He puts the mirror down so I can see him. And he starts telling us this story.

And by the time we get to the restaurant, we went over to Virginia Beach to a seafood restaurant over there somewhere near Witch Duck. I remember he pulled in the parking lot. And Beverly's crying. Twyla's crying. Harold's crying. And he parks the car and turns around and looks me straight in the eye.

And he says, "I want to ask you to forgive me for the way I've treated you all these years. It hasn't been right." They're all crying, and I'm going, what the heck is happening here? I had no idea. Like I said, I didn't have a hook in my head to put this stuff on. And God was talking to him about me, and he's sorry for it. I didn't hold any grudges against him. I was used to dads not liking me dating their daughters. Man, did that shake me to the core.

And so then when we were finished, before we went in to eat, he said, now I'm not giving you permission to marry my daughter.

And I looked at Bev and I said, "we haven't been talking about getting married." But he was already seeing where this was going. He already saw where this was going. But we weren't engaged. We weren't even really dating. In fact, I remember she grabbed my hand in the back seat, because she knew I was really nervous, because I thought, I'm going to get reamed out here. And there's nowhere to go. I'm trapped in the back seat of the car. And she grabbed my hand, and that was the first time we had held hands since I had began seeing her again. And anyway, so we went to dinner.

We had great fun. We laughed, told stories, and he was a different man. They invited me over to house for dinner. I helped him cut down a tree. And over the next two weeks, it was like night and day. This man just changed.

And I would go home and go to bed and go, why would he do that? Why is he doing it? What is happening? And because he did it, the whole family, I think, were upset with the way he had been treating me, because for whatever reason, I had favor with Twyla, and I had favor with Eddie and Linda. So they liked me and accepted me, but Dad didn't. And so he was kind of the stick in the mud, which Bev was really, I mean, he was his baby daughter. They were very close until I came into the picture. But they were all...the family was just so happy and genuinely authentic. We're glad that I was there.

And that love just really, I couldn't explain it back then, but I was not sleeping well leading up to the two weeks of, so that two weeks prior to Huntington, I had this experience. So Dad and Mom drive in. Dad gets in the front seat of the car. He said, "I understand you had kind of an amazing evening."

And I said, "Harold, I don't know how to explain it to you. I don't know what's happening to me. I think I'm having a nervous breakdown." And so I told him everything, you know, what was happening in the church.

And he said, "No, you're not having a breakdown. That's God's voice speaking to you. And you've had an encounter with God." And he just laid it out for me very clearly, what the scriptures say, what I did, how I responded, what's going to happen now, and how the enemy's going to come to me and make me doubt, and my friends will react negatively to it, because I worked with a bunch of wild guys at the shipyard.

He just laid it out. I mean, sure enough, it was like a prophetic storybook. And I would go to the shipyard, and we would always smoke pot in our breaks in between shifts and stuff. And I went Monday, and I said, "No, I'm taking a break." And I smoked cigarettes. I just stopped smoking cigarettes. I stopped everything. And nobody told me to do it. Harold didn't tell me to. I just instinctively thought, I don't need this. I don't want this. So I went through a bit of an agitation, about six months not having anything.

I was a little bit on edge, and I felt my body trying to adjust. But I didn't touch anything. And my friends got really upset with me. They were like, man, Mennonite girl is messing you up. You...you're such a wussy. You let her...She's making you religious. I was like, no, not really. I had an encounter with God, and I would tell them about it. And they were like, oh, my gosh, he's lost his mind. And they would mock me and laugh at me. But Harold told me that was coming. He said, this is coming. I thought I could go back and share it with them, and they would respond and follow me. But they didn't follow me.

They rejected me. And all of a sudden, I was in no man's land. My parents weren't saved. They were just glad I wasn't getting in trouble. They liked Bev in my life, because they felt like she stabilized me. I told my parents, but they were like, "Whatever. As long as you're not getting in trouble, we're great." Because I almost went to prison. I faced a three-year prison sentence when that jail thing happened.

That's another story, but the only reason I didn't go to jail was that my parole officer, when Judge Grissom was about to sentence me to three years at Southampton Road Camp, because I had been in front of him before. He went around and whispered in the judge's ear and said, "Don't do this. Give me one more chance with him. Give him one more chance, and I'll put the clamps on him. He'll go to rehab, da-da-da-da." They were in Sunday school class together, Great Bridge Baptist Church. I would learn later. And he had been praying for me for 18 months in his small group. He had like 300 guys under his charge that he was managing.

And when I found that out, I was like, he actually came to Mount Pleasant to our wedding when Bev and I got married. His name was Steve Terrell. But anyway, all of this stuff just changed everything. So after that, I just started attending church with Bev at Mount Pleasant.

Alan: How long did you stay at the shipyard?

Sam: I was there. I got laid off. See, I got saved in May of 1976, May 1, 1976. Bev and I officially started dating in June. From that point on, she was like, I've loved you the whole time, but because of your spiritual life, I couldn't commit to any kind of relationship.

And then we got engaged, and we were going to get married the following spring. And so by August, I said to her, why don't we wait until the spring? Why don't we get married in November? And she goes, I need a little time to plan a wedding. And so I left it up to her, and we talked to her dad, and he was fine with it.

What was your question then?

Alan: You were still at the shipyard then?

Sam: I was at the shipyard, and then we got married in November, and moved to that little house where Elsa Bergey lives now. Titus had the house moved to Mount Pleasant, but it was just a little four-room, two-bedroom, living room, kitchen house on the corner, right there at the end of where Grammy and Granddaddy Buckwalker lived. It was right there in that turnaround space. [Wenger Rd]

And so Eddie [Buckwalter] and I moved in there, and he helped me rent it until we got married. And then Bev and I moved in there first. And then I got laid off at the shipyard, and then Merlin hired me to work for you. And I worked for you guys at the tire retread plant. And then after the tire retread plant, I went to... That closed. I don't remember what happened to that.

Alan: It went bankrupt.

Sam: Yeah, it closed. And then you were going to hire me to... You and I talked about it. I don't know if you remember this, but we talked about... I was helping you with construction. You felt bad about laying me off at Crossroads Tires, and put me in to work at Crossroads Building. And I was working with Strawberry John, [John Henry Yoder] and I was his helper.

I didn't know anything about construction, but he was teaching me how to cut two-by-fours, and I worked with him. And then you and I talked about starting a painting business. And it was right around... I don't remember what happened.

I don't know if you ran out of work or what. Then Junie hired me as a mechanic at Yoder Dairies. And I said, Junie, I was looking for work, because somehow I think the work ran out at the houses. I don't remember all those details. But anyway, Junie hired me.

I was looking for work, and he said, one Sunday at church, he said, I can use you over at the dairy. I need a mechanic. I said, I'm not a mechanic. He said, well, can you change oil and spark plugs? I said, well, I can do that, but that's not a mechanic. I mean, my dad was a mechanic, but yeah, I'm not a mechanic. Well, I'll find work for you, to do. So I think he just felt sorry for me and hired me. And so I started working. And I don't know, he had talked to Merlin and other people, and said, this guy, he works.

He's not afraid to work. And so I started working at the dairy, and had the worst truck and the smallest route when I started. And three years later, I had been changed to the best truck, the newest truck, and the biggest route, because Fred Bridges resigned.

And I was the most money I'd ever made in my life, because I had this big route. But Fred was like 120. I don't know how old he was, but he was an old guy.

Alan: So you moved from mechanic to truck driver.

Sam: I was a truck driver. I was a mechanic more than six weeks, and then they had an opening.

And that's what Junie was saying. He said, there'll be an opening. My drivers tend to... And when this guy left, I took the worst truck and the worst route and the smallest route, but it was good money.

And Ivan [Miller] and... What's his name? He's still living. Oh, I can see his face. They trained me.

Alan: Marvin Zook?

Sam: Marvin Zook, Marvin and Ivan. And they liked me, because I was a hustler, man. I would deliver milk, and when I got done, I would have extra quarts, and I was allowed to lay them on people's doors and get new customers.

So I was always hustling. And I was building my route. Anyway, and then right in the middle of all of that good stuff, the Lord spoke to me about going back to college.

So then we moved to... I talked to Phil, and I talked to Robert. They were my pastors then, and Dad. And Dad was discipling me. And by that time, Dad had me...

Alan: By Dad, you mean Harold.

Sam: Harold, yeah. He became my spiritual father, and he really mentored me in the Word. And we would spend almost every evening free I had, studying the Word during those three years. And he got me reading my Bible. And so I started back in 1976, reading my Bible all the way through it.

I've been doing it for 48 years now. Every year. Dad said, if you read God's Word and hide it in your heart, you'll never get off the path that he has for you. So I just believed him. I did what he suggested. So, to my shock and horror I found that many pastors have never read the Bible through. It was like, y'all don't read the Bible through? They're like, you read it through every year? I said, yeah. So my father-in-law mentored me in that. Yeah, it takes 35, 45 minutes a day. Every day, you can read the Bible through easy.

Anyway, so then I went to college. My dad was furious with me because he saw the favor on my life. And he saw I had this really good job. Bev and I had bought a house over in Virginia Beach from Dave Zook. And Harold and Twyla helped us to get it and finance our first home. And my dad was like, "you're losing it. This God stuff is just going to be the end of you." And I was so heartbroken that he rebuked me for doing it.

But Harold and Twyla,...we had become so close. Bev and I with Harold and Twyla,

we were sad [to leave] because we were close, but they really said, you need to follow what God has for you. So I got accepted at EMU and moved up there.

We thought it was just going to be for four years then come back. And then my path took off in ministry and I started working for Virginia Conference as the youth minister. And then I started planting churches and yeah, it led to going to Italy.

Alan: The church that you were...

Sam: Cornerstone Mennonite Fellowship.

Alan: Yeah, how did you fall in with them?

Sam: Gerald [Martin] was the pastor of Tristles Mennonite and I was the conference youth minister. So I would preach.

And back then there were like 86 churches in the conference. And I was youth pastor for... Halftime youth pastor, halftime with a program called Partners in Mission working with Glennon Blosser. And so I was recruiting young people to go on missions trips because my heart was really with missions and with the church.

And so I did halftime youth ministry and halftime... only Mennonites could do that. You could do 86 churches half and half. Anyway, and it just flourished when I was doing it.

And so Gerald invited me one time to preach at his church as just a guest speaker and he liked it and kept having me come back. And well, then his church was one of the fastest growing. He'd taken that church and they had like 60 people and it just exploded with growth.

Alan: Was that the first Cornerstone church?

Sam: No, that was Tristles. And so Tristles was very, very traditional but he had really grown it through community people. So this would come back to haunt me when we were at Mount Pleasant and some of the same things happened at Mount Pleasant that happened at Tristles. And by that time, Bev and I were attending Tristles with Gerald and he asked me to come on as his assistant pastor.

So I was doing the conference missions. I was doing the mission work and the conference youth ministry and I was helping him out at this church and it exploded. Relationally, John Drescher was our overseer and he came and he said, there's OT and ET happening here.

OT is old Tristles and ET is emerging Tristles. And so they peacefully negotiated that they would plant a new church out of Tristles and everybody would love each other and be kind to each other. And John was such a great guy.

And so we did. And so we went to Broadway and planted a church and that was Cornerstone Church in Broadway. That was the first one. And we grew it to, I co-founded it with Gerald. So he and I co-founded it together and we grew it to about

1,000 people... in Broadway, which is unheard of. There's only 3,000.

There's only 3,000 people in Broadway. So people were coming from all over the county, Rockingham County, to attend this church, which was crazy. And it kept growing and growing. So finally then people from Elkton and people from Mount Crawford and eventually Waynesboro would ask us to plant churches there. And, but we didn't, we couldn't raise up pastors quick enough to take care of them. So Gerald and I formed a preaching team and we would circuit ride.

We called it like the circuit riding. Back then I found out a guy at Regent did a PhD paper on now, which many big mega churches are doing multi-site. They call it multi-site campuses. They said Cornerstone was the first one in the US to ever do that. We were doing multi-site in the early nineties and we didn't even call it that. We didn't even know what that was.

We were just, it was just growing so fast. We couldn't keep up. And so Gerald and I would then just circuit ride and we had some other guys, we raised up site pastors. And so anyway, we formed this team and it grew and grew and grew until...

Alan: Now you went from there to Italy?

Sam: So out of that, so I was the mission...I became, I emerged as the missions pastor and we were sending out a dozen teams a year on short term missions trips. And one of them led to Albania. And that's what you, that's really what you wanted to talk about, right? Was Albania?

Alan: Part of it, yeah.

Sam: So missionaries were coming off the field and they were retiring in Harrisburg and they would come to our church. So one of them was Roy and Florence Crider. They were missionaries in Israel for 34 years. So they retired and came off the field, but then they started working with us. And he was a expert in inner healing counseling.

And we had so many unsaved people coming with so many problems. We needed this guy's help. And he called me pastor, but this man really poured into my life. He really mentored me deeply. I would, when I was preaching at Mount Pleasant, I would refer to Roy a lot. And he just died. He was 97, I think. He just died over the last couple of years.

And so then Willard Everly came. He retired after 25 years in Sicily and he became a part of our church. So then I'm taking, I'm doing, and Roy, of course, Roy and Willard loved that we were such a missions church. They would say, you know, let's take teams to Israel. Let's take teams ... we have friends in Italy and dah, dah, dah, dah. So we were doing that. And that's how I went over and met a lady by the name of Gesina Blaauw. Well, what happened was-

Alan: She was from Holland?

Sam: She was from Sicily. Her mom was Sicilian. Her dad was Dutch. So she was bi-cultural. But what happened was I came down here.

I was working, by then I'm working on my master's at region in international relations. And I went to a meeting with a guy named Eric Watt, who I work with now at RUN. And he started this ministry called Reaching Unreached Nations. And he used to be the vice president of CBN International for about four years. He had a private briefing of pastors only in this meeting at this missions conference. And that's where I met him in 1990.

And he said, "the most closed country in the world in 1990 was Albania. It was like North Korea is today. And they said, it's cracking and it's about to break open. And we need to send missionaries there before the cults get there, before the Muslims get there" . And so Tom Yoder was with me in that meeting and we were living in Harrisonburg, but we were working together up there. And he helped me with mission stuff.

And I hit him in the chest with my Bible. And I said, "let's go there. Let's send a team to Albania." And he goes, "what?" I said, yeah. I said, "do you want to go?" Tom was, he was a little slower than me. And he had eventually moved there and be a missionary, but not right away.

And so then nine months later, I was in Albania. And during that nine months, Willard had introduced me to Gesina Blaauw. We invite, she was coming to the States. So we had her speak at Cornerstone. The church fell in love with her. She said, come, I'm going to be, I'm moving to Albania and I'll, I'll receive you as you'll be my first team to come and, and be there.

So that was, that was November of 1990. Cause I'd gone to the conference in September and November. We were already making plans. I had recruited about six or seven young adults and we were raising money and preparing to go to Albania in 1991. It would be June of 1991. We had no idea, but between that time period, Albania completely imploded economically.

It just imploded. They had, they had, they had murdered about 70,000 of their own people. They, this guy made Enver Hoxha, who was the, the dictator made, Stalin looked like a Sunday school teacher. He was brutal to his people. I mean, Bev and I cried with so many Albanians who'd been tortured and imprisoned, including Klementina. Her sister was actually an official in the South and didn't do something right. And they imprisoned Klementina in a...she probably told you the story. She actually was in a camp. And so anyway, we went there and started preaching the gospel right on the streets. And Albanians were coming to Christ all over the place. And that would be a turning point for me because once we, we, we were just preaching on the streets, but there were no churches to send them to. There was nowhere to go. Like sometimes you go do a short term evangelism, you preach, then you just point them to churches and they're taken care of. Well, there were no churches. So we started one in Tirana, but we were working in Lezha where Dini and Klementina were.

The first week we were in Tirana, the second week we were in Lezha and the government just said, we'll provide the sound equipment. We'll provide the square and you're free to speak publicly about your God, about whatever you want to do. And we were like, I mean the, Enver Hoxha's successor had a picture of himself

hanging on the building across the square. I still remember in the square. Dini probably took you there and told you the story and it was hanging on this thing.

And I remember looking at the dictator going, nobody's ever going to believe this is happening. So I'm preaching the gospel. My team's doing dramas and singing and skits. And we had, we had gotten some Albanian Bibles because people had been missionaries in Kosovo, which was an Albanian province in Yugoslavia. And there, you could get in there better than you could Albania. So we, they had printed new testaments and brother Andrew and I worked together in, in Tirana. So he gave me some cases of Bibles. So we distributed them right there in the street. And that's where Dini and Klementina were walking by.

At that point, Lezha's population was 15,000. Now it's 60 or 70. But back then in 1990, it was like 15,000.

And five, 6,000 were in the square. It was unbelievable. And I had asked God, I said, before I die, allow me to preach the gospel to somebody that's never heard the gospel before, before I die. And here I am, 30 years old, standing on this, on this platform, preaching the gospel to these guys. And when we gave the invitation, hands went up everywhere. I mean, hundreds and hundreds.

And we were like, we didn't know what we were doing. I mean, honestly to you, we were... we went out, I sent my team out with the Bibles and it was like when I, they didn't know it, but we learned through trial and error that they turn kind of mobish when they find out you're giving away free Bibles because they were so hungry for God and they'd never been allowed to. And so we were given permission by the communists to hand out Bibles because we'd done it in Tirana.

So I placed my team and I don't know, I had six or seven of them, and I make the announcement and I said, they're right there nearby you. And I mean, they, it was mayhem. And my team would come back and their shirts would be disheveled. They wouldn't be hurt, but it was just like, everybody just... I cried. I was like, I had never seen people hungry for God's word like that in my life. And I thought I was living a dream.

Alan: How did Dini and, Klementina emerge as semi-leaders?

Sam: They were the first ones that got saved. They were the first ones I baptized. I have a video. I could send a DVD with you and you could see their baptism. Have you ever seen it?

Alan: Yeah, he showed it to me.

Sam: Oh, he showed it to you. And so, they would be the first ones baptized. And they volunteered. And so, I started training Dini from the moment he got saved. And he was our first leader. They led house church. They were our first pastors in Lezhë. Then we went, we started planting churches in Lushnjë and down in Permet. They were our first ones to go down there. And then the civil war broke out and nearly destroyed everything we had done. We had to evacuate them out. They were in Greece for a year. And then they went back in.

And then eventually, just things just, mission board got involved and it got a little bit convoluted. And I left Cornerstone and moved down here. So I was no longer the missions pastor. And by that time, the mission boards had taken over.

Alan: Were you and Bev in Italy for a while?

Sam: Yeah, we lived there. We moved there in 1995.

Alan: So this was several years after.

Sam: Yeah, so this would be like four years after the... and that's what happened was, like I said, it just upset the apple cart of my life because we had already planted a dozen churches with Cornerstone. So they were established.

We had started a Bible school. I didn't think they needed me. And so I asked the elders, would you let me go over there? We have all these young missionaries going over there and some of them had never even pastored churches. I'm just telling you, we made so many mistakes. Because it was growing so fast, we couldn't keep up. So we were just doing the best we had.

So because we had these young couples in Sicily planting churches and in Bari, Italy planting churches, and in Albania, somebody had to take care of them. And Willard [Eby] said, "I can't do it, I'm retired." And so I volunteered, Bev and I volunteered. So Italy is like, this is like the boot here. And Sicily was down here. So we had a couple down here, the Jarrett's.

We had a couple in Bari, which is the back of the heel of the boot. So like, this is like the heel of the boot. And then Albania is right here, across the Adriatic.

Well, because of my diabetes, Bev negotiated with me. She did not want to move to Albania with no medical care because their medical, even today is still rough, but it was really rough back then because they didn't have anything. I mean, when I went into the country Gessina [Blaauw] told us to bring food with us, canned food with us because you're not going to be able to buy food here [Albania]. The country's starving. So we went in and they had green tomatoes, goat cheese, and bread. That's it. In the entire country. So we took pork and beans and tuna fish and peanut butter and jelly. And that's how our short-term team survived the first trip because you couldn't buy it. There were no restaurants.

I mean, it's hard to imagine that. So anyway, back then, then all that stuff started developing and then VMM got involved and Virginia Board got involved and short-term teams are coming and this thing is getting crazy. And I was trying to manage it from Harrisburg and I just couldn't do it. It's just, I'm going every other month, I'm flying to Europe. And Bev's like, you know, you remember you're married and you know, you are a pastor here and you know, you have children, you know, so, and I went through a massive burnout because I was trying to keep up and I couldn't. So the elders said, finally released me and said, look, you can't do both.

And so they gave me a short sabbatical to rest up and then we moved to Albania in 1995 and we were there, in Italy, we were living in Bari but we were, I was traveling

all over. I was just dragging my kids. They were doing homeschooling and we're making this up. We look back on it now and we must've been crazy. But our kids will say, now as adults, we'll say, oh, those were the best years of our life. They loved it. 'Cause we were just together. It was like we were ministering as a family the whole time. Kind of like sometimes you see the, the, these conservative singing groups that have their children and their wives and they go from church to, and it was kind of like that, except I was preaching and training and stuff.

And Bev was amazing and flexible and we just fell in love with all these new believers over there. so we would spend a few months in Albania and then we would spend some time down in Sicily and then we'd come back to our base in Bari. so we did that until 1997.

And then I came back in '97 and then, moved down here [Chesapeake, Va] in '99. It was the middle of '97, almost '98. I was only up in Harrisonburg for a year and then we decided to move home. And then Eric offered me a job with RUN, Reaching Unreached Nations. And, and so I started working with him with RUN off and on from that point on.

Alan: Do you know Bertie Dosti?

Sam: Who?

Alan: Bertie Dosti.

Sam: Yeah, yeah.

Alan: How was he tied in? How did he come to this?

Sam: I don't know. You're talking about he's in Albania, right?

Alan: Yeah. He's got a church south of Lezhë.

Sam: Yeah, I don't know how, I don't know his story. Dini would probably know it better than me. Because I primarily was involved in setting up the Albanian Mennonite Mission Foundation which was the covering for the churches and helping with the churches in Lezhë, Lushnjë and Permet. And basically the reason that the churches have stayed small is that once the Albanians became free...I mean they were imprisoned in their country, in their city, in their country.

So the first social phenomenon was when they were freed, they all started moving back to where their home place was because the communists basically managed everything. I mean you couldn't even get a light bulb for your apartment without a special permission. I mean that's how brutal this thing was.

Where they'd have a wedding, they would want a higher wattage bulb to have people in there. I mean Dini said, "oh we used to have to go and you'd have to go sign a thing and you'd get the bulb and you'd put it in and then when the party was over you had to take the bulb out and take it back." I mean it's just, we Americans cannot imagine the communist ironclad thing.

So when it was released, chaos ensued. And that's why the civil war happened because then the communists thought they were losing power and they tried to take it back by force but the people, they were too free at that point and they fought and the communists didn't win. But it was a bloody mess.

I mean some of our people, one of our YES team members got shot. We evacuated them all to Bari [Italy] and yeah those were crazy days. So then they started sending missionaries and it kind of pushed Dini and Clementina out. It kind of pushed them to the edges.

Alan: How come?

Sam: They didn't think he was ready yet. They thought he was too inexperienced. But we were following more of a New Testament pattern. I mean Paul was very quick to preach the gospel, disciple them, raise up elders and move to the next city. I mean he just did that. So we were following that pattern. Mission Board got involved. They didn't want to do that. So by that time I had moved on. I had moved out and they instituted that whole thing and so they would hang on. They hung on in Sicily for 25 years. And so it stunted the church growth.

Even today the Mennonite churches are stunted in Sicily because the missionaries stay too long. That's my opinion. You write that down and somebody read it they'll get mad at me but we've argued about this. My missiological position is totally different and that's what they did in Albania. So Dini wouldn't emerge for a long time and I would have placed him as pastor from the beginning. Would he have made mistakes? Sure.

Alan: He went to a Bible school.

Sam: Yep. In Duras.

Alan: Who sponsored that? Where did that come from?

Sam: We did. Yeah. We all worked with him to get him there. Because we saw potential in him from the beginning. And so yeah. So a lot of craziness would happen and Dini's would come back here and raise their children and then Klementina already had her masters at Tirhana University but it wasn't accepted anywhere else outside of Albania.

So she transferred some credits to Regent and Regent picked her up and then she got her masters at Regent. Dini was working at CBN at Regent. He was like Pat Robertson's buddy. These guys got along so well. Oh my gosh. Dini won't tell you this story but Dini got hired....Klementina got hired two days after they arrived here. Because we moved here from Harrisonburg we said but all your friends are in Harrisonburg you should probably go there. You'll have more job opportunities more people you know.

They said oh no wherever you are that's where we're going. So we picked them up at the airport and we helped them get a place. I think they stayed at the Bergey's and Bergey's had an upstairs apartment or something. And so, yeah we started piecing it together but I was telling them hey guys you're not going to know a lot of people here

because most of your friends were from Harrisburg area. But they said wherever Sam and Bev is is where we're going. So that's where they came.

So then Klementina got hired at Cedar Road Christian School. And it took me about two weeks. Eric Watt helped me because he had connections at Regent. Dini couldn't really speak English but he got hired... they had a stack of applications like this and they took Dini's application and put it on the top. Interviewed him they fell in love with him. Hired him on the spot because he was an electrician and he was like a guy who could do just about anything. That's how you had to be in Albania. I mean to survive you had to be jack of all trades. And so that came in real handy with building services at Regent.

And of course he's so...you know how he is. I was working on the second floor of the CSB building for RUN. He was on I'm on the third floor he's on the second floor.

So the first year we're kind of working together. And we'd have lunch together downstairs at the picnic table. And I would go around introducing him to the few people I knew because I had gone to school there. A year later every I would walk with him through campus and I mean literally every student, employee would say hey Dini, hi Dini, hi Dini. And he's introducing me. And I would meet people sometimes on my own and Eric would bring up Albania and they'd say "oh you were the guy that went to Albania. Do you know Dini Shahini?" I said, "of course I know Dini Shahini. I baptized him. They said, "you did not." I said "I most certainly did. I got a video to prove it. And people would... because he was so well known.

So after a couple years then Pat [Robertson] fell in love with him and just just loved him. And so he would go to Pat's house because Pat was chancellor and lived on the campus. He would go to Pat's house and fix stuff.

And Dini would tell me stories of Pat and Dede being in their pajamas having breakfast and be having a disagreement and they would bring Dini into the thing. And Dini's like, "oh no, no, no, my friend Sam told me never get in the middle of this kind of conversation." And Pat had a place way up in Warm Springs a private retreat house. And Dini would go up there and fix his skeet shooter. And so I mean I was like "dude I'd like to get to know Pat Robinson a little bit better." He's just... yeah so I mean it's just the way it was with him.

So then when Klementina finished her master's she did her master's thesis on a Christian school. Because I had been telling 'em for years about a book written called "Eternity in Their Hearts" by...what was his name.. Don Richardson. He wrote the book "Peace Child." He was a missionary among the head hunters in Papua New Guinea. And he wrote this book called Eternity in Their Hearts and one of his theological missiological perceptions was that God puts a key to the gospel hidden in the culture of every people group in the world. That was his thesis and he backed it up with research and stories. So I used to go what's the key to Albania? You know what's the key to Albania? And Klementina said, "I know what the key is".

I mean this was after we had already gone in there and made a lot of mistakes. She goes, "it's education." She said, "one thing Enver Hoxha got right is that every village in Albania even under the worst communist economic problems, had electricity and

the other thing they had was schools.” 30% of the population by the time they imploded and opened up could speak English, 80% could speak Italian and it was because of their school system. But Klementina said the school system is so corrupt and no resources you know if we could go and do an American style school in Albania it'll change the city. So that's kind of what... and so by that time they're kind of on their own.

They're speaking in churches and they're at Mount Pleasant and Landstown and they're speaking in churches and the mission board picked up on that and wanted to get behind them and so EMM and VMM said we'll fund that and they began to and Klementina... that's how this whole thing got started. Her board is still going I was the chair of the board but I'm not an educator so I was like you need to get Don Steiner. He was on the board with us I said, “you need to be the chair of this board.” Once it took off I said this is way beyond my pay grade.

I'm a starter I'm more of a starter and releaser and Don...and I think to this day Don's still the chair and you saw the school. It's a magnificent work and it all began with Klementina's thesis at Regent and so I just encouraged them and so I told Dini if you bridge the school to the church you're gonna see... and that's when they started baptizing families like crazy over there. Coming back to what I started to say and then I went off the track... because Albania was so closed for 50 years when it finally opened up and Albanians were free, man they wanted to get... they wanted to move wherever they wanted to in Albania and then they wanted to go find jobs because there's still like 60% unemployment in Albania so they started leaving so we would we would lead people to Jesus we would baptize them we would disciple them. Mary Bergey would teach them how to play guitar and lead worship and then they would go and I mean we funneled through Lezhë hundreds. If we had every Albanian that got saved in Lezhë that church would be a mega church over a thousand, two thousand people. I've lost count and so that was really hard on the mission board because they just couldn't perpetually fund this thing and that's when I told Dini when they went back I said “you need to pastor this church and it needs to become an Albanian church not an American church. You can do the school thing that way because you need to have your own music and your own preaching and you know it needs to become Albanian if it's ever going to be rooted there permanently.”

So Dini then got to work and he was the one who raised the money to put them in the church where they're at the building where they were. He did all of that it was amazing.

Alan: Are they considered Mennonite or part of the Mennonite group.

Sam: Oh yeah oh yeah yeah it's called Albanian Mennonite Foundation is the official title. The name of the church is “Guri I Themelit” which means cornerstone, stone of foundation and they named it after Cornerstone because we were the church that planted the church yeah but they they do not hide the fact that it's a Mennonite church.

Alan: Are there other Mennonite churches there or is that the only one

Sam: The one in Lushjnë didn't survive and the one in Permet didn't survive the civil war

so it's the only one that I know of. There could be others by now but I may not...

Alan: But they said they belong to another... to an Albanian church association

Sam: Yeah it's an evangelical association it's called VUSH they call it VUSH it stands there's four Albanian words for VUSH. But yeah they we did that when Gesina and I went in. We started a thing called the AEP that evolved into VUSH and the reason was that we knew that the Roman Catholics would come and the Greek Orthodox would come and the Muslims would come and the cults would come and they would try to destroy these churches so it was a pretty amazing phenomenon that we acted so quickly when we got in there the evangelicals had 10,000 believers within a couple of years and we were the first in before all the others got in and got organized because of course Catholics are going to build cathedrals and Orthodox Greeks are going to build big buildings so all that took time we started building house churches we started doing it doing little storefront churches and that kind of thing so we actually beat all of those guys and laid a good foundation. So what they did from that it evolved is that the evangelicals missionaries and pastors just formed an alliance to help one another and they still do it to this day which was I think was a brilliant thing that Gesina Blaauw did. She lives in Holland now but she's retired but yeah she did amazing...

Alan: Was she the interpreter?

Sam: She was. If you saw a picture of me standing there [preaching in the Lezhë square] she was almost a midget she was so tiny and yeah her and a lady named Najua Diva from Brazil these two women. they were they were the ones they were the if you will, the apostles who opened the door to all the evangelicals coming in including us. We just happened to be the first team. we were literally the first foreigners there. Bev and I would be the first foreign family to live in Lezhë. And it was all just by trial and error, we just kind of stumbled into it.

Alan: Cornerstone is still going, right?

Sam: Yep yep Gerald's retired and they've multiplied into two clusters of churches. One's called Redeemer. Landstown is a part of it and oh okay is it Redeemer?... or... I haven't kept up with them.

Alan: Is it a like a separate conference or...

Sam: Yeah... they left Virginia Conference when they started compromising on all this homosexuality stuff. Cornerstone left. It used to just be Cornerstone Network and then when Gerald retired Kenton Slabaugh took half of the churches and is overseeing them and Greg Mayo in Virginia took the other half and has been overseeing them so they're kind of like a non-denominational group.

Alan: So they don't consider themselves Mennonite?

Sam: No. But a lot of Mennonites attend, are still in leadership and attended those churches because that's their roots. The roots are Mennonite. When we started Cornerstone, like I said, all those guys came out of Trissels [Mennonite Church] There were some community people, but a lot of Mennonites. And we attracted a lot of Mennonite

leaders over the years. Especially the missionaries who came off the field and didn't have anywhere to go. They loved Cornerstone because we were doing a lot of church planting and missions work and that just was in their blood. And then we had a Bible college for a number of years and had Mennonite professors there, 'cause they felt like EMU was too liberal and we were teaching basic church planting skills and that kind of thing. But I don't think the school goes on anymore. I don't think Gerald could manage that.

Gerald's like 86 now. His wife just passed away a year ago, Sophie.

Alan: I read a book I guess was written by one of the founders.. I forget the name now, maybe it was Gerald... about Cornerstone and the history up through whenever it stopped.

Sam: Yeah. Yeah he did. He wrote a book called... he gave me a copy of it...I forget the title.

Alan: It was very interesting. So why did you all decide to leave Harrisonburg and come back to Tidewater.

Sam: You know once Cornerstone became a thing, Gerald started changing he really started operating more like a CEO rather than a pastor. And he just changed and we felt like when we left we saw the change happening but I was so busy and dealing with the overseas stuff I kind of burned out and so when we came back he asked me to come back and I came back and he put me right back in the position I was as a co-founder and associate to him but we never didn't feel like we fit anymore it wasn't a good fit so then we decided to come home.

I had always promised Bev when all the moving... when we left here in 1980...I went to college in 1980... I was going to go up there and come home in '84 and move back into the house in Charlestown and Dad and I were going to pastor together. This is an interesting piece of the story it probably stretched me and Robert and Phil the most but while I was doing my practicum I would come home for the summer so Bev could be home and I would do my practicum under Harold at Landstown which was called Upper Room Chapel.

Alan: he was the first pastor.

Sam: Yeah he was the church planter and he literally laid the brick on the building and his dream was that I would come back and we would pastor together. That was our dream and that was my dream and we were this close to doing it and then but of course Phil didn't know and Robert didn't know because we hadn't had a chance to tell them yet. We weren't quite sure whether they would even be open to that because he was my father-in-law. We kind of thought well maybe... dad said "well we'll just work we'll talk to them." So we were making plans I was going to graduate and we were going to move back in 84 and then Phil and Robert decided abruptly to fire dad.

Alan: Well you're telling me something I don't know.

Sam: Yeah this is an interesting part of the story. Fired dad, they asked him to resign.

Alan: Why?

Sam: Because they felt like the church wouldn't grow under him. Because he was a teacher and not a preacher and guess who they wanted to be the pastor. Me. So they fired dad and dad goes and by that time... before let me tell you the story... so prior to that dad could I don't know if he would tell you now.

Alan: I've interviewed Harold. He has his memory has gotten so bad...

Sam: Yeah I remember this because this is pivotal to why we never came back here until '99 we wouldn't come back until '99 we would leave here we were gone 20 years with all of the stuff but the reason we didn't come back in 84 which was our plan because they were living in our house renting their house living in our house holding that for us because we bought it together and we were going to figure out a way to pay them back and move back here. And dad wanted me to pastor with him and I wanted him to continue discipling me in leadership like he had as a disciple. So they fired dad basically I mean that's basically what they did they asked him to step down hurt him and mom deeply I mean deeply and nobody wants to talk about this. This is a hidden thing and it took dad years to get him and Robert to reconcile because Robert was pushing for me to be the pastor and Phil was going along with it because Phil was the overseer but Robert was.. I don't remember Robert was an overseer too? Those two were kind of working together and anyway well that hurt us because mom and dad were so hurt.

I'm sorry... what happened before that was that the mission board asked dad to plant this church they were in a church planting mode so they got the blessing of Mount Pleasant and some people from Mount Pleasant helped them to plant Upper Room Chapel which would become Landstown. Well dad was going strong with Church at Sea with the mission board and the mission board said "no we're all about church planting now this ministry has gone on long enough we really need to close down the ship ministry and you need to be our full time church planter". Because every time they get a new administrator he'd have a new vision and Adona Nissley was the guy that had the vision for the church planting and no longer doing the ship. That's the old out with the old and in with the new and so dad being a compliant leader with the mission board and with the conference, he went along with it. Well then they get him over here and he plants the church I came down every summer and worked with them I was there this summer when they were praying for land and Dave was an elder and some other guys were on the elder board and John Moomaw used to lead worship and

This is probably going into more detail than you want.

Alan: No it isn't

Sam: So he's resigned from the mission board. He only has Upper Room which is becoming Landstown. He's literally laying the brick I would bring short term teams because I was the director of partners in mission so I would lead teams to Haiti and different places and I brought short term teams down to help lay brick from all over Harrisonburg, these young adults were laying brick with dad at the church out of the blue we were having this family process...dad said the church loved me because I would come down and preach a lot of times. I'm young inexperienced I need him to

coach me in ministry and so Bev and I were planning to move back that was the plan until...I mean we were just so close...and I know Robert and Phil would say now, God rest their souls, they would have done it differently if they had known but they didn't know. So they asked dad to step down to create a space for them to come and invite me to come and be the pastor. Mom and dad wanted us to do it but we were like.. no that would be like somebody firing your dad and saying Alan I want you to take your dad's spot when your dad was called to do that. Dad wasn't ready to... he was 55 so what does he do? He does what they ask and he goes and gets a job and he works for David Zook. He's digging foundations and curbs and anyway he's there about a week and he tells it so funny...The Lord says "Harold, what are you doing?"

"I'm digging a ditch."

"Why are you in the ditch?"

"I need to feed Twyla and I don't have a job. You kinda know what's happening here.

Is this a trick question?"

He said, "I called you to the ship ministry."

"Yeah, but the mission board."

"I don't care about the mission board. I called you to the ship ministry. You're to board ships." and so he went over and handed David a shovel and he said "I'm sorry, God told me I'm done here. I'm going to board ships". And he walked away. It's the truth I mean I'm not if that was said in here it's God's honest truth and dad walked away and he started Church at Sea and he never ever tried to raise money. He never ever. But the word out... Newport News, Mennonites in Harrisonburg... I shared it everywhere I told everybody who had ever loved the ship ministry because I had a platform with conference at that point. I traveling all over conference.

So all of that's happening and then Robert and Phil come to Harrisburg and want to sit down and talk to me and Bev, and they want to invite me to come and be the pastor. Now, Robert and Phil are having to cover because dad stepped down and they don't have a pastor. And they wanted me to come to Landstown. So we prayed about Landstown. Sam Weaver wanted me to come full time with Virginia Conference as a youth pastor. Glennon Blosser wanted me to come full time with missions. Gerald Martin wanted me to come to Trissels. And I don't know if Cornerstone has started yet. No, I was at Trissels before I was at Cornerstone. So he wanted me to come to Trisseles. And Willard Eberly was inviting me to come to be a missionary in Sicily because I had gone over there in short-term teams.

So we had five things and Bev was like...and at that moment it became very clear to me that I needed to, I had been traveling so much for the conference. I was traveling all over Virginia Conference, preaching at churches and I was traveling all over for PIM. We had two little baby girls and Bev's like, "honey, I need you at home. I need you, you need to be a father to our, I mean, you're a good dad, but you're not here." So I looked at all the options and we prayed and we decided to go to Trissels because it was just too emotional for us to go down and take mom and dad's place.

And mom and dad begged us. They said, "no, don't let what happened to us stop you from coming," but we just couldn't do it. It was just.. we hurt for them because they were so...I don't think anybody realized how deeply that hurt them.

Alan: What year was that?

Sam: That would have been 1984.

Alan: Okay, I was a Methodist then and that's why I didn't really... because I remember my dad setting some...I don't know how I even learned it, but that he was, he and Ivan Miller and others, obviously, were giving money to Harold for his new thing, but I didn't know the story, nothing about it at all. That's all I know.

Sam: And Mennonites are very good about not talking about stuff. We hide stuff, we sweep it under. And I'm not, but so fast forward, and then I want to come back and tell you a story about your dad before you go. But, because he was real pivotal in my first, my conversion, and I meant to tell you, and I got lost in my own story.

But where was I going?

Alan: You all decided to go to Tristles.

Sam: Yeah, but there was something I was going to tell you that happened down here.

Alan: Well, who became pastor with Harold not there then?

Sam: They had to find an interim, and from that point on, they would struggle for years with a permanent pastor. I forget who, there's a litany of them. They never could keep a pastor there. So, I know what I was going to tell you, and then I'm going to tell you a story about your dad.

I came back, eventually, in '99, I came back, and I was pretty fried. I had done so much. I wanted to finish my master's, and Eric had offered me a job.

Well, Adona Nissley, no, not Adonia... what's his name? I can see his face as clear as day. A Mennonite guy, what's his name? Oh, he was there for like the longest. And he went back to Pennsylvania and passed away. Oh, that's terrible, I can't remember his name. Anyway, he knew this whole story, and he just hated it. And he just... Noah Stoltzfus, does that sound right? Noah Stoltzfus was the pastor. And he'd have me preach sometimes at Landstown when I was living up in Harrisburg. But Noah and I had become friends, and he just was wanting to retire. And he said, "your destiny is to come and pastor this church." And he talked the elders into it. And I really wasn't in a good frame of mind, but I came and did a one-year interim for him. Well, by that time, there was just a lot of weird stuff in the leadership, and I wasn't in a good place.

Alan: What happened?

Sam: Well, I just stayed there a year. I only went for a year. But what happened was my first Sunday, everybody was excited. Robert, Phil, people from Mount Pleasant came, and church was packed out. And mom and dad were still hurt. They were sitting in the audience, and they were still hurt. And I thought, how can I just, I mean, it was awkward. It really was awkward.

Alan: It would be.

Sam: Yeah. So I just said, from the pulpit, I said, "guys, I don't wanna open an old wound,

but I'd like to give God an opportunity to heal what happened. And without going into all the details, mom and dad are here, Harold and Twyla are here, and they are the founders. And many of you know, they were the founders of this church. And they were asked to step down, I think prematurely, but my opinion. And Phil and Robert are here, and they used to be the leaders of that. And I think, wouldn't it be great if we could have a prayer time of healing for that? I just thought it was a good idea. I thought, you know, cause there was this cloud hanging over Lansdowne, and I thought spiritually it could open the door for God to move.

Robert was furious. He was so mad at me that day. I mean, he came up and he did it, but he was mad. Phil was okay with it. He thought it was a good thing. Phil was that kind of guy. And Phil was my first pastor. So I was always very, very close to him and Verna Mae. I mean, he pastored me until I lost him, when he lost his memory. And I used to go see him with Robert and cry when I was, cause he just was my pastor for so, I mean, for so long, him and dad both.

Anyway, we had a prayer time. Robert was mad at me. I told him, I said, "I didn't do that to embarrass anything. I just thought spiritually would be a healing thing". But Robert felt embarrassed. And so it would take us a couple of months to work through. We worked it through. God rest his soul. Robert and I, we became very, very good friends. He was the guy who coached me when I was at Mount Pleasant and telling me, you need to navigate this a little differently. From up in New York, he would write me letters. He said, "you gotta navigate." He'd listen to every one of my sermons. And he said, "man, you're a great preacher, but you gotta, you're not navigating properly." I said, "I don't know how be a Mennonite pastor." Anyway, so that was my story there. And you know about Mount Pleasant, so.

But when I, the morning I got... I got saved in June. I got saved in May. I got started getting disciplined in the summer, June, July, and August by Phil. And by October, they were gonna baptize me. Well, they usually have a number of people, but that particular Sunday, it was just me. And I was a little nervous about it. And I remember Phil had me come up front. I don't know if you were there then. This would be 1976, October, 1976. Church was packed out I remember, and people were still wearing plain coats. And some of the men were sitting on the one side and the wives would sit on the other. It was still back in that era of 1976. And I remember Phil was so excited about my conversion. He just said, "this is a God thing." And that I got saved at Mount Pleasant Mennonite Church. It was a big deal for him. And I remember he said, "I'm gonna do some things that are just things we don't normally do here, but I'm gonna do them."

And I didn't realize how radical that was. And he said, one of the things is, I just wanna give people opportunity to respond to Sam's story, because I'd shared my testimony and then he opened it up. And I didn't, I had never done it before, so I didn't know what was new, what was old. I'd find out later on, man, this was, this was had not been done at Mount Pleasant before. And your dad, nobody said anything for the longest time. And your dad stood up in the back and he said, Sam, I just wanna tell you, you're a part of our family. You belong to us. You didn't just get saved out of the world. You got saved into a family and you're a part of our family. And I just welcome you to this church. I embrace you as a brother. And then other men stood up and said things and then they clapped. And I remember that, I remember he was

standing in the back and he spoke with such authority. It was really, it was really moving. And then Phil baptized me.

He poured, he poured water on my head. I knelt in the front and he poured water. And then he said, all right, I still, I just feel like I need to offer prayer. I want some, I don't care, whoever the Holy Spirit moves on, you come up and lay hands on Sam and we're gonna pray for him. And five men came up and all of them were wearing plain coats. And one of them was Phil's dad, Grandpa Miller. And I remember he had, he shook. I don't know if he had Alzheimer's.

Alan: He had palsy.

Sam: Palsy. And I remember it took, he decided to come and it took the longest cause he was slow and he came up with his cane. And I remember it was Francis Miller and there were other, but they all had plain coats. Menno Yoder, he had become a very close friend of mine. Anyway, they all came up and they started crying. They were weeping. And I was like, what is going on? And I'll never forget, I'm on my knees and I look up and Grandpa Miller comes and he drops his cane. He just lets his cane fall. And he grabs my face and he kisses me on the forehead. And I lost it. Because I'd never been kissed by a man my entire life. My father had never kissed me. I'd never been held, loved by men before. And I remember they were praying over me and I said, "God, these people are so weird, but I'm never going back. I'm never going back to the world. These are my people."

I don't understand. I didn't really even understand what was going on, but I would tell this story about Grandpa Miller all over the world and everywhere I share it, people sob. Because I said, I was a drug dealer in Virginia Beach. I was as lost as you could get lost. And this Mennonite church who really wasn't used to people like me, took me in and made me their own. So I think that's why when I became pastor at Mount Pleasant I loved the church that way, but I didn't know, I didn't know what I was doing.

Beth warned me. She said, "honey, don't do this. Don't."

Alan: What happened? You see, we were brand new back because we'd been Methodist for 20 years because the Mennonites wouldn't let Linda join. Not for doctrinal reasons, but Robert... It took me a long time to understand it. I carried a grudge about it for a while. When we asked to join the church because Linda and I had gone forward and rededicated our lives. and she wanted to get involved in the church. She wanted to teach Sunday school. She wanted to be active. Well, to do that you had to be a member. And I knew they weren't going to let her join. I wasn't even sure I was still a member. And so Robert came by, in fact, I went back to talk to Ivan. He wasn't very encouraging. So I knew I was in trouble.

Sam: Yeah, Ivan's a pretty optimistic guy.

Alan: And so Robert came by and said, "Alan, you're a member in good standing." He said, "however, we can't admit Linda for social reasons, because there would be some hard feelings in your former family." My other in-laws, Francis Miller is who he was talking about. I said, "okay, that's that." I said, well, if you're not good enough for my

wife, you're not good enough for me. And we went looking. That's when we found the Methodists, which was probably a good thing because Mount Pleasant Methodist at that time had Donnie Wheeler and a bunch of them and Tom Mercer and others who were young and evangelical. And it was a great learning place. A lot of friends who are still friends. But anyway, I finally got over myself. Robert and I made peace somewhere along the way and I understood exactly what he was talking about.

Sam: Yeah, there's a lot of crazy stuff. And that's why when I went there, I really didn't know. I had planted churches. All the churches I had ever pastored were churches that I had planted. So I didn't know Mennonite church polity at all.

Alan: But what happened from your viewpoint?

Sam: Yeah, you know what happened. Didn't go well. I went there. In fact, Bev warned me. She said, "honey, please don't do this..Don't." Keith was begging me to come help him. And I would preach once in a while as a guest and people loved it.

Alan: You're a good preacher.

Sam: I told Keith, "I said, yeah, but there's a big difference between preaching and pastoring, you know, dude." And I said, "you know, Bev's not real excited about this." And he's like, "no, you need to come help me. The church is changing. We've changed our constitution. We've made it more biblical. And, you know, you could work with our new elders" and, you know, on and on and on. And I was working full-time with a life-forming leadership coaching and I was going big guns with them all over the world. And then 2008 hit and the funds ran out and the whole thing just shut down. And I had a little tiny business thing going on, but not much. And yeah, and I had already resigned from New Life Virginia Beach and they didn't want me to leave. I pastored there for 10 years. So there just was no door. And the only door for work was Mount Pleasant. And I just told Keith, you know, we went back and forth and

And Bev begged me. She said, "honey, if you do this, it's not gonna end well. I know you." And I said, "what are you saying?"

She says, honey, "you'll just be consistently you."

And I said, "is that a bad thing?"

She goes, "it will be for Mount Pleasant." She said, "they won't like your leadership. I'm just telling you this because I love you. They're my family."

I didn't listen to her. I let Keith talk me into it. And so it started out, you know, it started out at one year, one year. Well, it started out preaching once a month. Then it was preaching twice a month. Then it had taken a one-year interim with Keith and we co-pastored together. I was, I was, because Bev was freaking me out. And then, and things started going and I didn't really understand.

There's an above ground dynamic and then there's an underground dynamic. And I didn't understand the underground. And we had run in with Linda Miller and she went, she got on her horse and was, there was a lot of weird stuff happening. And I was not keeping up because I was determined to do a good job at Mount Pleasant. And there were like 70 people there when I came and there was close to 200 attending when I left. I thought that was good, but that really wasn't good because they were a

lot of community people coming and that wasn't a good thing.

And now, so there were these kinds of things that, and you would write me letters, you know, "dude, you're not a very good pastor. You're not doing very well. You should..."

Alan: I did? I don't remember that.

Sam: Yeah, yeah. I still have them. You wrote me a number of letters. I still remember that. 'Cause you were with that underground group. You were hearing all the hubbub and nobody would tell me to my face. It's the same thing that went on with mom and dad. I didn't know that culture. I didn't understand it. And in fact, tonight I had to get a notebook down cause I'm doing something for Bev and I opened it up and there were old sermons. And there was my resignation letter that I read when I resigned in August of 2014. And I read it right before you came. I was like, wow, where is that thing? I hadn't read it since I read it that Sunday.

And I thought, yeah, so yeah, I just, I just made a lot of mistakes because I was growing the church the way I knew to grow a church. And the elders were all on board. And I thought, well, if I have the spiritual leadership of the elders, I'm good.

Admin to me, I didn't realize Mount Pleasant, and I don't know if it's still this way, but admin and elders are equal. They're like two cabinets. You know, like the Senate and the Congress. And I didn't realize that Mount Pleasant was set up like a political system. I mean, I knew they had a constitution, but I never, never pastored a church that had a constitution. So then when I learned the constitution and started following it, then people got even more angry with me. And I was like, I'm damned if I do and damned if I don't. So yeah, and it was the worst pastoral assignment I ever had in my life. It really was. Yeah, I would come home and go to bed at night and Bev would lay there. We'd lay there in the dark and she goes, "you okay?"

I go, "yeah, I'm good, I think"

"How are you feeling?"

I said, "I'd be feeling better if your relatives weren't giving me such a hard time."

She goes, "I warned you." She's so German. She's like, "I warned you."

I said, "I know you did, baby. And I, and you know, and the Bible says I should always listen to my wife and I didn't listen to you. So I'm suffering, I'm suffering rightly so."

So when it got really convoluted, what was his name? Randy Cobenitz? he begged me to stick it out. And I said, I can't, I said, I can't do it anymore. I said, I said, these are people, these are people that I, because like I said, when I came to Mount Pleasant and started pastoring there those six years, I'm still living in 1976, '77, '78, 1980. And so all of the people that I looked up to, I mean, to this day, Harold, Harold's friendly to me, but I tried to reconcile with him. He would not reconcile with me. Harold Bergey. And Harold was the one who resigned. I didn't take his place, he resigned. But him and Rose were behind a lot of the stuff going on. And I went to him and I said, "Harold, come on, man, I've always looked up to you." I sat down on the front porch with Bergey and I said... this was before I resigned... but I was headed out the door. I said, "I don't want to leave and you and I not be reconciled." And I said, "I'd really like to ask your forgiveness, whatever I did that offended you.? 'Cause I

couldn't understand why he was offended with me, but he got mad about a lot of things.

I mean, I had a guy there one Sunday, he was a drama guy who did Jesus. I don't know if you were there that Sunday. He did drama. He memorized, he's memorized every word in the New Testament that Jesus ever spoke from Matthew to Revelation. So I had him come in and for 30 minutes, he had a outfit on and a thing. And he did this sermon on the mount verbatim. And I put on the bulletin cause I wanted it to be fun. I want it to be surprised. I want to do something different, you know? And I put on the thing, Jesus quote unquote was the sermon, you know, on the bulletin and I put Jesus. And then I put the Matthew passage of sermon on the mount. Nobody knew what was happening, but me and the elders.

And so, and he was in the office cause we had the office behind the pulpit. And so I told him, I said, "when I pray, that's when I want you to come out." And he already had a mic and the guys were ready. So I said, by the time I had everybody bow their head, close their eyes, I said, "I want you to have an encounter with Jesus this morning to launch our new year." And that would be the last year I was there. It was January of the last year.

And this is just an example. And so this guy comes out and people had their heads bowed and their eyes closed. And when they looked up there, he's standing there, full beard, long hair. And I'd seen him do this at other places. He was amazing. And he did the whole sermon out walking through, picking up children, the whole sermon on the mount, verbatim.

When Harold saw him come in and do that, he walked out of the church. I found out later he was, he was infuriated with me that I had deceived the people. And I told him, I said, I can't win here. There's this, I can't win. Yeah, that's, he never told me, he told other people, but Rose would tell somebody who would tell me that he was, he felt that by me putting Jesus on there, it was somehow that was offensive to him. I was thinking, so one of the guys, I can't remember his name.

He was, he was, oh gosh, you would know him. He's still living. He almost walked out. He said, when I saw that, I thought, what a sacrilegious thing. And he said, I tried to get up out of my seat and was like, God had glued his butt to the seat. So he opened his Bible up. And then all of a sudden he realized this guy wasn't acting. He was reciting word for word, the entire Sermon on the Mount in his translation. He was blown away. And this white guy, he's a white guy, tan, but he's married to an African-American. And his wife had different things out in the lobby, books that he's written and different things that he did, because it's a very unique ministry. And they became friends. He really liked him, but he'd tell me later, I was going to walk out like Harold did. It's like God glued my butt to the seat. He said, I couldn't get up.

Alan: What was Harold's resentment?

Alan: I don't know. I never found out. This is the thing that's puzzling to me about Mennonites. You can't reconcile sometimes with them. They don't, they won't tell you what it is. So I found out, Rose was jealous.

And the thing that I finally learned that the issue was when I came to Mount Pleasant, of course, I'm totally an idiot. I was, I was, I had to take a 10,000....what I was paid as lead pastor at New Life Church for 10 years, I had to take a \$10,000 cut to come to Mount Pleasant. And what they offered me, they had never offered any other pastor before. Now I didn't know any of this. Keith would tell me this later, but they had a formula. They had a sheet. The admin had a sheet that they use from conference. And if you had this many years of college and this much experience and dah, dah, dah, dah, well, all those things I had added up and they ended up more than they'd ever paid a pastor before.

Well, I didn't know that. And I was told the admin wasn't going to do it. And I said, well, then that's fine. I won't take the job. But this is, this is, this is y'all's sheet. It's not mine. I didn't bring this formula in. This is yours. I just filled it out. And now you're, and, and, and, and, well, the admin got mad because they were like, well, we can't tell the congregation we're not going to hire you because, you know, that's going to embarrass us. And I'm like, well, guys, I'm not trying to create a problem. I mean, just say it didn't work out and we'll just let it go. And y'all can keep looking. They'd been looking for a pastor for four years, but they wouldn't do it. They went ahead and they went ahead and did it. And they said they were okay with it, but they weren't. And I found out that was the issue, that was really the issue that was bothering them, that I was overpaid. And I was like, really? Well, then why didn't you just say no? I mean, but they had their own dynamics going on.

You know, the families within Mount Pleasant have their own history. I learned, I would learn this as we went along. And they, the elders, bless their heart. They tried, they tried everything to educate me. I was, I was, Bev would try to educate me. Harold and Twyla would try to coach me, but nobody could, I just couldn't get it. I was like, the harder I swim, the madder they get. And the more work I do, the more angry they are. And the more success it seems to be. We're baptizing people and we're, people are getting involved in ministry, but it's a bad thing. It's not a good thing. I'm lost.

So it, it emotionally fried me. I was, I was pretty well fried.

Alan: I could imagine.

Sam: Yeah, I was pretty well fried. So when we went away and they decided to have a meeting while I was gone with Randy and talk about all my mistakes as, as a pastor, I, Randy wanted me to stay. And I said, "no, we're going on vacation."

I'd found my brothers and sisters who I'd been looking for my whole life in Missouri. And we were going to take a two week off. And on that two week drive, Bev and I talked. And we kept saying, every year we'd ask the Lord, should we stay or should we go? And the Lord would say, I want you to stay. So this, that summer on that trip, the Lord said, oh, we're, we're free. He said, I want you to be free.

Alan: How many years were you at Mt Pleasant

Sam: Six years. Six of the longest years of my life. Yeah. And I didn't have a job either. When I left Mount Pleasant, I had no job. And, but I, and I offered to resign. I offered,

I resigned in August because nobody saw it coming. I mean, I came back from our vacation, met with the elders. Bev and I had made the decision. They tried to dissuade me. And I said, no, and I'd really like to announce it in August. I felt Nevin should be the next pastor.

I felt he's young, he's passionate. He really had grown for the six years. I saw him really grow immensely. And I said, he's, he's, he's one of them.

Alan: His roots are there.

Sam: His roots are there. He needs to be the next pastor. But I can't control that. But, but at least he could be interim. So then I offered from September, October, November, December, I would help out in a, in a clean transition because I didn't want to leave bad. These were people that, these were my people, you know, and they were Bev's people.

Alan: Half of them were related to you.

Sam: Yeah. And that's what I would tell Bev. And I said, I don't want to leave bad. Bev wanted me to come back and get up in the pulpit and resign and we walk out. I said, no, we're not doing that. She was really mad. She was really, cause she's my wife. And she was, she was just sick of it. And I said, "no, honey, that's a great idea. And that's funny, but we're not going to do that."

So we must have had 14 scenarios. And the one we came up with was what we did. And I submitted it to a couple of pastors that I'm friends with here. And I said, hold me accountable. I want to do the right thing. So I did it. I preached my best. I felt like my best messages the last four months I was there. In fact, the last message, I remember sharing that message.

And I got a letter the next week from Robert [Mast]. He said, wow. He said, that was phenomenal. And I left and I went to Greenbrier and I didn't preach there for... till two years ago. My first sermon there. I'd preach for RUM and do missions conferences, but I'm preaching once a month there now, just helping out.

But, but yeah, that was probably my most disappointing thing was that I reconciled with Nina [Troyer] cause Nina was hurt and mad at me. And Lynn [Keffner] came to me a couple of years ago and he and I had lunch together and it was under his leading. He wanted to reconcile with me. And we, I didn't know that we had that much, but apparently he had some stuff he wanted to work through with the Lord. So we, we had a great, great time together. But Harold was the one I was the most disappointed in personally because he was the former pastor and he'd been there all those years. And I'd always looked up to him. And to this day, I mean, he's very cordial when I see him, but we, and I don't even know, I don't even know why. That's, that's even the most puzzling thing. If I, if I knew why I'd go, wow, you know, it'd be great if I knew, if I knew why. Yeah. I mean, I had no idea.

Alan: I had no idea. I knew Rose was resentful, but I just put that down to Rose being Rose.

Sam: Yeah. Yeah. Well, she felt like, I think she was jealous. There was some jealousy I

would hear from her.

Alan: That makes sense.

Sam: Because Harold was there for so long. And the reason Harold left wasn't because he was called to leave, he left because of money.

Alan: Well, money and family, they needed him to rescue the farm.

Sam: Yeah. Yeah. So there were these issues going on. Of course, I didn't know any of that. I just knew that he had resigned and I figured, well, he just had enough 17 years, a long time to be a pastor of a church. And, and so that's why I was totally caught off guard by their resentment. But now, you know, after you leave and then you, you hear stuff and you finally put, it's like a puzzle. I put it together.

Keith and Lori spent hours here afterwards. We'd talk in the middle of the night and Keith helped me to catch up. And the other thing that happened was, when I teased Keith about this, cause we're very, very close. I said, "you left me, you know, you left me. We were together. And then he went through his own emotional burnout. He had a personal meltdown in his life. He couldn't, he was either lose Centerville Insurance or leave Mount Pleasant. And so he left and then Nevin came and that's when it all hit the fan because they asked me to step up.

The elders asked me to step up full time from halftime. And that's when it went. And I, and I didn't want to do it. Keith and I were, Keith and I were co-pastoring for two years, two or three years.

Alan: Did Keith resign before you did?

Sam: Yeah, he stepped down. He had to have a rest. His doctor said his, he had, he was going through some counseling and they said, you're, you're, you cannot do these two. And it really wore on him because I'm just being me and doing my stuff. And Keith has taken the beating. I mean, he really got hammered more than I realized.

Alan; Oh really?

Sam: Oh yeah, yeah. He was constantly the buffer between me and the people that were against, the group that was against me. 'Cause it wasn't the whole church. It was just a group, a couple of families. And, but man, they, they were brutal.

And it just, it just, it just broke his heart. And so then he stepped down and of course, I'm not still, I'm still not getting it, you know? I'm such a thick...and yeah. So if I looked at it, I remember when I resigned, I remember people were crying at that, at that business meeting and in back Bev was in the corner.

And I remember Ron, what's his name? Big Ronnie ...Lehman. He went out to, he had to leave. And he goes, "so you okay?" And Bev goes, "yeah, I'm fine." He goes, "so how long, how long has Sam been thinking about resigning?" And she goes, "how long we've been here? Six years? Five years and three months."

'Cause every year we would, my anniversary, cause you know, the way Mount Pleasant works, you don't want to do it in the middle of the year. And so every year I'd go to her, should we go? We'd pray and the Lord would say, "no", but I was ready every year.

I was ready every year. Cause I kept thinking, there's a big difference between pastoring, pastoring and leading and preaching. And I said, they like me to preach, but they don't want me to lead. And so then when Keith stepped down, then I felt obligated. I felt like I can't just walk out on them. And of course I had enough people. There was 85% of the people wanting me to stay. And in fact, even when I resigned, they wanted me to plant a new church. And I said, "guys, I'm not doing that."

I don't have the emotional energy to do that. I just want to slip out well and leave the church in good hands. Nevin will be great. The elders will be good. The admin will be happy. They'll be able to fix things the way they want to. And it'll go on.

But I didn't realize when I left, how many people would leave. I had no idea. 50, 60 followed me and Bev to Greenbrier. And I said, "guys", after the first Sunday, we all went to lunch. I said, "I'm not pastoring here. I'm working for Eric at RUN. It's a missions organization outside of Greenbrier. I'm just coming here because this is like home for Bev and I. We were part of that network of churches, New Life."

Because New Life came out of Greenbrier.

Alan: I didn't realize that?

Sam: And I was the senior pastor of New Life Virginia Beach, which was a daughter church of them. And so when we went to Greenbrier, that's the mother church. So for us, it was like going home. In fact, when we drove in the driveway the Sunday after my last Sunday at Mount Pleasant, Bev goes, "we're home." I was like, "I thought Mount Pleasant was your home. " She goes, "oh no, this is home."

Alan: Yeah, Brent and Kelly [Miller] were New Life members.

Sam: Yeah, At Great Bridge, Steve just resigned from there. So yeah, and so those guys are all always...

Alan: Maggie [Miller] is still there.

Sam: Yeah, all of those guys were my best friends., and they were the ones ministering to me when I was getting beat up so bad. I would go have lunch with these pastors and they'd go, "how's it going?" I said, "I made a huge mistake, guys. I listened to my wife and they were like, oh, it can't be that bad." I said, oh man, it's really bad." I said, "they're not happy with me." And I said, "nothing I do is right, you know?" Anyway, but then I went back about a year later to a funeral and everybody loved and hugged on me.

And I told Bev, I said, "they're not mad at me anymore."

She goes, "oh no, you're gone. You're done now. They'll love you the rest of your life".

I said, "Wow," I'm really... because I'm still kind of remembering how mad that some of them were with me. And I said, and they go, "oh, it's so good to see you." "I'm like, okay, I still don't get it."

She's, "oh, you're not the pastor anymore. They'll love you."

Alan: Oh, you'd be welcome anytime. By everybody.

Yeah, yeah. But for me, it was just, it was confusing for me, yeah. But yeah, so that's why in my resignation letter, I said that, I said, "I made a lot of mistakes, guys. And I'm sorry, because I didn't do it on purpose. I just didn't know. I really didn't understand".

I mean, I've been a part of the Mennonite church since I got saved. But all of the churches I've been with..I was at Mount Pleasant from 76 to 79. After that, I was with charismatic Mennonite churches and churches that were, we planted Mennonite churches.

So I never had been a part of a traditional Mennonite church, even though I'd come home to Mount Pleasant and I was loved there. And I didn't understand the politics. I didn't understand the church polity. So like you did, even though it hurt you, you left and went to the Methodist church. You understood, I left. When I resigned, I still don't get it. I don't, she said, "let's just move on". Because she got tired of trying to explain it to me. Because it didn't, she understood it, but it was hard for her to articulate it to me. She just intuitively knew. So to her credit, if she was sitting here, I would go, "you warned me." I mean, she, I mean, as strong as she could, I said, I said, "well, I can go sell cars or something. Maybe we should do that." Maybe I..." "No," she says, "I know you want to preach and you want to." But she said, "I'd be more open to you planting a church than to going to Mount Pleasant."

I was like, "why? They want, they need help. Let's go help them."

She goes, "honey, you're just so, you're just so optimistic."

And I kept telling her, oh, we're gonna, we're gonna, every year I'd say, "it's gonna get better." And when it would get quiet, I was thinking it was getting better. I didn't realize that they were just simply getting reinforcements and getting ready for the next volley. I didn't understand that, you know, cause I would interpret quietness as Peace. Peace as, yeah, we, you know, we were making headway and it's just, yeah, anyway. So that was...

Alan: After you were at Landstown, then you went to New Life?

Sam: Yes, they, Bobby Hill was the lead pastor. They had eight churches and a pastor resigned from New Life, Virginia Beach. And he asked me to be the pastor, the coming pastor. There was like five, 600 people there.

Alan: That's why you left Landstown.

Sam: Landstown. I only was there a year. Yeah, I made a one-year commitment. And again,

it was, their polity was different, but it was just, I don't know. It just, they were wonderful people. It just didn't feel like a fit. And I was still recovering because when I left Cornerstone to move down here, I was experiencing my second burnout because I tend to give 110% to everything I do. And that's a detriment to my health.

Alan: You can't do that forever.

Sam: Yeah, you can't do it. You do run out of, they call it serotonin. You run out of it. And if you run out of it, they say what happens, if you don't pay attention to it and rest, you'll use adrenaline. If you use up your adrenaline, you're in trouble. You'll end up in a hospital. And I've had two severe burnouts. So just because I just give it everything and do too much.

So I rested that year, worked with Ron. I was a director of mobilization for them and it was an office job and I was working, yeah, man, it kind of administrative and working on my master's. And so then Landstown asked me to come. I agreed to come for one year interim. They figured, oh, once his foot's in the door, he's gonna stay. And I just said at the end of the year, they said, guys, "wonderful. We've had a great year. Thank you so much. But I'm just not the guy. I'm just not ready." And then I don't remember, I guess I gave him like three months notice. And then during that three months, Bobby Hill and I were meeting together and Bobby was kind of ministering to me.

And he was saying, "look, New Life Virginia Beach is really a fit for you."

Alan: Where were they located?

Sam: Well, they were meeting in Larkspur Middle School. And then we went into a building campaign and I bought a building over in, off of Witch Duckin a business park. And we were there for... I was there almost 10 years. We had three services.

Alan: Are they still there?

Sam: No, the new pastor took over after me. He drilled it down into the ground and. Yeah, closed it,. Yeah, we had 750 people there. Three services, two in English, one in Spanish. Yeah, it was going really, really well. So those people were absorbed into the New Life Providence, which has four campuses, and Greenbrier and different ones. Yeah, my church planting days are over. In fact, my pastoring days are, they, a lot of the people, when Eric stepped down at Greenbrier, they asked me to be the lead pastor. I said, no, "I gave my wife my word. I'm done. No more lead pastoring."

I'm 66, you know.

Alan: You're that old?

Sam: Mm-hmm.

Alan: Well, I guess you'd have to be. I forget when I talk to people how old they are, because I forget how old I am.

Sam: So we had some couples that were so... they liked Bev and I so much, they said, "if you're not gonna be the new lead pastor, then we're leaving."

I said, "gosh, I'm gonna miss you. I'd hate for you to leave."

But they were thinking that would, you know.. and I said, "oh, I'm way beyond being, I gave my word to my wife, we're done." My wife, I mean, it takes a toll on your family to pastor a church, and we've had a lot of great years, so I preach once a month, and I help out in a few things for them in leadership. You know, I'm kind of the grandpa. So that's a good fit for me, and I work full-time with RUN. I sold my businesses, and so, yeah. Trying to, you know, all the churches I pastored all promised me a retirement fund, but none of them ever gave any, so now I'm trying to, I'm working on that. That's really the next 10 years I'm trying to put money away to retire. Whenever I can't function anymore,

Alan: How old was your dad when he died?

Sam: My dad was 76. My mom was 73. She died of, she had a hole in her heart, and they tried to fix it, but she died of heart failure. And then my dad died, he died really of COPD. He was a chain smoker for years, smoked Camel cigarettes with no filter. He used to call them his coffin nails, and tell me, "hey, give me my coffin nails". You know, and so he'd get them, and then when he got COPD and was dying from it, I always said, you know, he'd say, "oh, it's that asbestos on the ships?" I was like, "dad, you smoked like a freight train for 50 years, no filters." he said, "oh, it had nothing to do with that. So you used to call them your coffin nails." He'd say" Oh, I never said that."

I said, "okay, I made it all up." But yeah, he passed away. He got saved three days before he died. My mom got saved three months before she died.

Alan: I remember you talking about that, that I do.

Sam: That all happened at Mount Pleasant, when I was at Mount Pleasant. Keith and I... Keith helped me bury my parents, and I helped him bury his parents. And a lot of other people. I couldn't believe that six-year window, how many funerals. I had never done that many funerals in my entire ministry.

Alan: It was an old church.

Sam: Right, but I just didn't realize that many would die in a six-year window?

Alan: Yeah, because probably, I mean, I don't know this, but I'm just surmising, if you were primarily involved in startup churches, they tend to be young people.

Sam: Yeah, they are a lot of young people, yeah. Most of the churches I went to.

Alan: That church is old.

Sam: But even Keith said, for Mount Pleasant, that was a lot of people in that six-year window, starting with Eric [Keffer], he would be one of the first ones. His was unexpected. There were a couple of those kind of funerals, but then there was just a generation, a whole generation that passed away. I thought we were doing a funeral every, I mean, that's why I became good friends with Tim Briggs. Just him and Bobby

Oma, they were like, you know. I remember Tim and Bobby were telling me... I'd go to their Christmas party, because Bev works part-time with them. He said, "well, if you ever need a job," I said, "well, thank you." They knew, it was like we were partners. So many people used them.

Yeah, well, I don't know if I gave you what you needed or not.

Alan: You did. You did. Especially the history on the Albanian stuff.

Sam: Yeah, that was so cool that you went over there.

Alan: And also, you were inside of the stuff at the church, because I've always been curious about your side of it. And you always seemed the eternal optimist.

Sam: Yeah, that's what gets me in trouble. Bobby Hill tells me, he's a very good friend, overseer, pastor I've known for many years. "You're overly optimistic." I said, "thank you."

Alan: Well, better that than...

Sam: Yeah, I have no hard feelings. I pray that one day Harold and I will talk and I'll figure out what happened, because that's probably the only last thing that I know of that there was no closure with. And after I left and Rose died, and he's busy, and maybe he doesn't even think about it anymore. But it was disappointing to me, simply because Merlin and Linda were really good friends of mine, and Harold and Rose were good friends of mine. So, for those two couples to be upset with me and Bev over church stuff, it was more than I could fathom.

Alan: Well, I do appreciate your time, Sam.

Sam: Thanks for coming by. I'm glad we finally got it done.

Alan: Yeah, I wish I had started this 35 years ago.

Sam: Well, now you got time to work on it.

Alan: Yeah, and 35 years from now, somebody will be glad that it's there. Love you, brother.

Sam: Love you too. Thanks for coming by.

Alan: Talk to you later.

Sam: All right, you have a good day.