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# What Has Happened to Me

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# What Has Happened to Me

Shirley D. Straker

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**P**aul said: “I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel...” (Phil 1.12). As I chronicle my physical journey in an effort to understand my spiritual one, I pray that my journey has also “served to advance the gospel.”

## **Background of the Journey**

I was born into the Church of Christ. My parents and grandparents handed down the church’s legacy to me: they believed in God; in his son, Jesus, the Savior; and in the Holy Spirit. They believed one became a Christian by believing in the Lord, repenting, confessing and being buried in baptism for the remission of sins (as an adult by immersion in water). At that point, the new child of God received the gift of the Holy Spirit and the Lord added that person to his body, the Church of Christ (which they believed was the only “true” church). Thereafter the Christian served God daily, not forsaking the assembly; partaking of the Lord’s Supper every first day of the week (Sunday); hearing God’s word, the Bible; singing without the instrument (*a cappella*); and praying.

For many years, I accepted all of these teachings and practices without question.

## **Steps on the Journey**

1935-1949.

I was born in Kalispell, in northwestern Montana, the oldest of four children birthed by my frazzled mother in four years. When I was five years old, our family moved to the small farming community of Fairview, in northeastern Montana, where Dad worked in the family blacksmith shop. Mom cared for four small children and sold butter made from her Jersey cow’s cream. Money was scarce but we supported the war effort by taking our dime to school every week and buying United States savings bonds.

The small Church of Christ there was made up mostly of relatives—many of whom were blessed to be able to sing well and, judging by their faces, I knew they took seriously this part of their worship to God.

In 1944 we moved to the railroad town of Livingston in the Rocky Mountains in southwestern Montana, where Dad had been hired to preach. We expected to move into a brick house reserved for the preacher...but the congregation had been offered “a good deal” for it and sold it before we arrived. So Dad and Mom bought a three-room house for \$1,000, under which Dad dug a basement and then added on a second story.

There were few Church of Christ young people in the area and we missed our Fairview relatives. But we loved the mountains and spent many happy hours wading in the icy Yellowstone River while Dad fished and Mom embroidered, or going on picnics in the mountains. During the summers we attended vacation Bible schools around Montana, memorizing scripture, singing camp songs, and getting to know other young people.

In addition to his preaching job, Dad worked as a foreman for the A.W. Miles Lumber Yard. Mom took in laundry and we girls vigorously scrubbed socks every week so they could be hung on the line to show the neighbors how immaculate Mom’s laundry was. Later she worked in Livingston Memorial Hospital’s kitchen and laundry room. My parents gave liberally to God and impressed that concept on their children every Sunday when Dad placed a silver dollar into each child’s hand for the collection.

Both my parents' families were blessed with musical talent and Dad often gathered us around the kitchen table to rehearse older hymns and to learn the four-part harmony of new ones. He felt it was important not just to sing a song's notes correctly but to concentrate on the song's message.

Perhaps Dad's example of reading voraciously and contemplating what he read encouraged me because reading became a favorite pastime (or obsession) of mine. I was a sober child and a loner even when I was young, so books afforded an escape from reality, such as doing my chores. (When I had children of my own, I read to them from the time they were infants and they also developed a love for books, learning and contemplation.) My sister was an artist and she and I decided that, at some point, I would write a book and she would illustrate it.

When we first moved to Livingston, we drove twenty-six miles every Sunday morning to worship with the Church of Christ in Bozeman, Montana. We were not only blessed by worshipping with that congregation, but we children enjoyed the companionship of the preacher's children, whose family lived upstairs. On Sunday afternoons we drove back to Livingston for evening worship and met in the Elks Hall basement (which smelled strongly of alcohol and cigarettes.) Before long, however, Dad—with the help of other brethren—dismantled an old school house and used the lumber to build the Church of Christ building on Park Street, where we met thereafter.

Of course, the preacher's family attended every service of the church—though I did not always do so willingly. Making up sermons that I felt sure Dad could preach alleviated the boredom I sometimes felt. At these times, I thought there was be a distinct advantage in being a male. If I had been a boy, I could lead in worship.

When I was ten years old, while we still met with the Bozeman church, and in response to my concern that I might die in my sins, my parents consented to my being immersed in Bozeman's Lindley Park Creek. As I came up from the water, I felt a huge burden had been lifted from my young shoulders.

#### 1949-1960

Before getting married Dad attended winter Bible schools in Saskatchewan and, blessed by the Bible teaching he received there from J. C. Bailey and Miss Lillian Torkelson, he determined that we children should have the same opportunity. So he and Mom sacrificed to send us to Radville Christian College (RCC) in Saskatchewan, 600 miles away. As the oldest child, I was the first to go at the age of 13, exhorted by my Dad that, in spite of my youth, he trusted me to choose to do God's will in whatever I did.

The flat Canadian prairies were definitely not my beloved Rocky Mountains, and I was often homesick for my family. But I enjoyed wholeheartedly living at RCC with Christian young people and being able to participate in church-approved activities. I discovered I was a natural leader and that I could be a good student. I also assisted chorus members with four-part harmony when we performed, and helped write and edit the school newspaper, *The Trumpet* (fueling my childhood dream of becoming a writer). To help pay for my schooling, I also set type (by hand) for the *Gospel Herald*, Canada's Church of Christ publication; did janitor work in the dorms; and assisted with meals and dishes in the school kitchen.

My heart was often pricked during my four years at RCC by some speaker's Bible lesson. When this happened, I would go forward in worship services and ask for congregational prayers to do better.

When I graduated in 1953, Miss Torkelson, RCC's principal, encouraged me to pursue a college degree. My Dad loaned me \$300 but grumbled, "It's a waste for a woman to get a college education. She'll just get married." (As I continued taking courses over the next 40 years, however, he said he should have given me more money.)

I attended Abilene Christian College, in Abilene, Texas—known even back then for its singing groups. I auditioned for but was not chosen to sing with the A Cappella chorus, but was mollified somewhat when I was chosen to sing with the smaller Choralair chorus...especially when the assistant choral director intimated that I would be chosen for A Cappella if I returned the next year. Also, it was too costly to major in music, so I took home economics, thinking it at least would be practical.

I lived in Barracks 1—the girls' barracks—and participated in devotionals and fellowshiped with seven spiritually-minded girls from northwestern United States. In addition to their encouragement and examples, I was thrilled to be able to praise God with 1000 Christian young people on campus, and being able to worship in congregations so much larger than those in Montana and Saskatchewan made my year at ACC a highlight of my life.

### 1954-1959

After working for a year as a switchboard operator and radiology transcriptionist at Livingston Memorial Hospital, I returned to RCC in three capacities: as the Board of Directors' first secretary, the new typing and shorthand teacher and the new chorus director. Miss Torkelson proved not just to be the excellent teacher I had known, but a mentor and friend as well. Like myself, she sometimes questioned the Church of Christ stance on issues; unlike me, she had learned to be content in every circumstance—a lesson my often-rebellious soul badly needed.

On December 22, 1956, I married Walter Straker, a fellow RCC graduate from Canada, and we moved to Abilene to continue our college education. I was hired as secretary for Highland Church of Christ; after he received a visa, Walter worked with his brother Bernard as a custodian there. We felt blessed to work for, and worship with, the caring Christians in that 900-member church.

Our son, Richard, was born two and a half months prematurely on January 17, 1958. On November 22, 1958, our daughter, Vicki, was born one month early. By this time Walter, who originally intended to become a petroleum engineer, changed his major to Bible because he enjoyed preaching so much. We both worked but also continued to take classes.

### 1960-1971

Our first ministry in Canada was with the small Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, Church of Christ. We lived in the church basement, which served as family living space and church classrooms. We discovered an advantage to living in a public edifice—there were two bathrooms! But challenges included having two small children who loved to push the wooden chairs across the tile floor during assembly while their pregnant mother (who felt the preacher's family should always sit in the front pew) tried to control them. Fortunately, I was rescued when the wonderful sisters there offered to assist me.

Two daughters, Jackie and Pamela, were born in Prince Albert. Between them I miscarried premature twin girls, Hannah and Mamie. Although I was a preacher's wife and busy mother of four small children, I directed and sang with the Prince Albert chapter of Sweet Adelines.

In 1964 Walter was hired to preach in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. One opportunity he had, in addition to his regular ministerial duties, was to work with Dr. Abram Hoffer, a psychiatrist who developed a Vitamin B12 therapy to treat schizophrenic patients. Two of our members suffered from this illness. Still determined to finish my degree, I took another English class.

In 1965 J.C. Bailey encouraged Walter to move our family to India where the two could do mission work together. Feeling called to this work, Walter purchased boat tickets and we began packing. Unfortunately, I suffered an emotional breakdown after our son Norman was born by Caesarian section on January 27, 1966. Diagnosing this event as one triggered by my terror of coping with five small children in a foreign country, my doctor advised Walter to resign from the ministry and find other work. Walter did so immediately and began selling insurance. For years, though, I felt that if I had just had enough faith, we could have gone to India.

That fall we moved to Regina, in southern Saskatchewan, where Walter sold insurance for a while before serving as the congregation's second minister. I taught women's Bible classes (I especially enjoyed teaching young women); spoke at the Western Christian College (previously Radville Christian College) lectureship; and co-taught at area Bible schools. Walter was awarded Western's Alumnus of the Year in 1970 and, in 1971, when our support was dropped, we sought God's guidance to a new ministry.

### 1971-1983

That summer, after teaching classes at Yellowstone Bible Camp (Bow & Arrow) close to Livingston, Montana, and visiting my parents, Walter was interviewed and hired as Bozeman's minister. God blessed his work, and that of the other elders who also held Bible studies, and the congregation grew from 100 to 300 members in our first six years there. Four full-time ministers were added from 1976-81 and, during our twelve-year stay, 600 individuals were baptized into Christ. Part of this phenomenal growth was due to the baptisms of university students after the elders hired a campus minister from Gainesville, Florida, in 1976.

Over the next ten years Walter made nine mission trips to India. In 1981 Norman (then fourteen years old), four-year-old Jonathan (our “Isaac” who had been born in Bozeman), and I accompanied him on a six-week trip.

While in Bozeman we witnessed the marriages of our four oldest children to Christian spouses and of my widowed father to a woman he and Mom had taught years earlier. I again taught children’s and women’s classes; spoke at Bow and Arrow camp; and sang for weddings and funerals. I also sang with Montana State University’s Symphonic Choir but dropped out when one individual expressed his fear that my singing religious songs with instrumental music might offend non-instrumental Church of Christ members.

During one of my free voice lessons from Dr. Hickman, the music department head, he asked, “Do you sing solos in your church?” When I explained that we worshipped with congregational singing only, he asked, “What does God say about using your talents?” From then on I pondered just what God could have in mind for this talent.

### 1983-1991

Still thinking we might move to India, in 1983 we returned to ACU to take missions. However, we discovered that the Indian government now granted only three-month visas to missionaries, so we were unable to go. While we continued our graduate studies, Walter preached for the small Nugent, Texas, congregation. We loved to ask our oldest member how she was feeling because she invariably responded, “Barely! Just barely.” However, we were horrified one Sunday when she related how she had killed a rattlesnake on her front porch that morning with her garden hoe.

In 1984 Walter graduated with a master of arts degree in Bible; in 1991 I gained a master of science degree in English (creative writing). We now felt ready to return to full-time ministry.

### 1991-2013

We felt God answered our prayer in January 1991 when we accompanied Glen and Gwen Dods to Brampton, Ontario, where Glen—assisted by Walter—conducted an evangelistic church growth seminar. After the seminar the Bramalea elders offered ministerial positions to both men. However, Glen and Gwen preferred to stay close to their Texas family, but Walter accepted the invitation. I thought two years would be the maximum time we would live in this huge metropolis (far away from my mountains). Walter thought we would stay for five. As of July 2013, we have completed our twenty-second year with the multicultural Bramalea congregation.

When we arrived, the church was an active but predominately Caucasian group. Now two-thirds of the Christians are from other countries. Once a visiting preacher surveyed the congregation and remarked excitedly, “This is what heaven will be like—‘men of God from every tribe and language and people and nation’” (Rev 5.9). Walter and I are “Mom” and “Dad” to several of these people and I also correspond with young women around the world who were contacted here.

Bramalea’s women are active in several ministries: prayer, fellowship and visitation. In addition to regular worship and classes, the congregation is also involved with Camp Omagh, a Christian camp situated 30 minutes from Brampton, and with Great Lakes Christian High School and Great Lakes Christian Bible College.

In Bramalea, I have taught ladies’ classes and retreats; trained FriendSpeak workers; and taught creative writing at Great Lakes Bible College. I also had several secular jobs in the Toronto area, including teaching children’s literature at a community college and being a temporary or full-time secretary for various businesses. Since 2003, however, I have enjoyed being Bramalea’s “temporary church secretary.” I feel this is a God-given ministry—both a joy and a challenge—that allows me to keep my finger on the pulse of the congregation, as well as to work alongside with Walter in his ministry.

Family-wise, our two youngest sons married while we lived in Brampton—one in Texas and one in Japan. We now have children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren in Texas, Tennessee, Colorado, Montana, Japan, British Columbia, and England.

### **Assessing the Journey**

Looking back, I see that I was often thrust into positions I did not desire or feel capable of doing. I realize now that God was stretching me and preparing me to go through doors I would never have attempted to enter on

my own but where I could accomplish good for him and his people. In addition to loving books, reading and philosophizing, though I am often a loner, I discovered that I also love people and (with God's guidance) can empathize, counsel and teach (whether it's the Bible, children's literature, FriendSpeak, or creative writing.)

My entire 65-year spiritual journey has been a quest to discover God's will for my life. Sometimes, after studying and praying over perhaps a theological issue, I have forged ahead, confident that now I understand it. At other times, doubts, what ifs, exhaustion or discouragements have overwhelmed me, and I have stumbled until I again go to God.

I thank him for the love and guidance he provides through his word, the Holy Spirit and loving individuals (including my God-centered family) who continue to touch my life, encourage me, challenge me and keep me accountable to my Lord—even when I drag my feet.

My prayer is that I will be able to say with Paul, in the remainder of my journey, that “what has happened to me” has truly served to advance the gospel of my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

**SHIRLEY D. STRAKER** IS STILL IN MINISTRY WITH HER HUSBAND IN TORONTO, ONTARIO. HER GOALS FOR 2014 INCLUDE INTERACTING MORE WITH BRAMALEA'S WOMEN IN THEIR MULTICULTURAL WOMEN'S MINISTRY, INCLUDING ENCOURAGING THEM TO REACH OUT MORE IN THE COMMUNITY; MORE ENCOURAGEMENT OF THEIR YOUNG WOMEN; INCREASED PRAYER FOR THE SPIRITUAL GROWTH OF THE CHURCH AND HER FAMILY; AND CONTINUING AS AN INSATIABLE READER OF "BUT WHAT IF...?" BOOKS, FICTION, THEOLOGY, ETC. (SHIRLEYSTRAKER@HOTMAIL.COM)

