

## Who Am I?

While the leaves were falling in Jonesboro, Arkansas, in late October 1944, a large host of ministers and saints were gathering in preparation for the conference of the Pentecostal Church, Incorporated (PCI). The host of this grand event was Rev. T. Richard Reed, pastor of Bible Hour Tabernacle. The PCI and local church constituents were all in heightened awareness that a great merger was under consideration. Speculation was that the PCI was planning to join another Pentecostal organization, the Pentecostal Assemblies of Jesus Christ (PA of JC).

Irene, a member of the Jonesboro church, opened her home with the agreement of her husband, Billy, to host ministers who needed housing. Due to the large gathering of Pentecostals, housing had become a logistical problem. Two ministers entered their residence and ousted at least one of the Smith boys from his normal sleeping arrangement. As I recall being told, one of those visiting ministers was named Rev. George L. Glass. The young man who lost his bed was none other than Vondas A. Smith, my father at 17 years of age.

My roots into the United Pentecostal Church (UPC) go back to 1944 and earlier. It wasn't until September of the next year, that the two organizations both had their conference in St. Louis, Missouri, and separately voted on the merger. I can't tell you when my father was first licensed with the UPC, but were I to guess, I would say around 1950, shortly after graduating from Pentecostal Bible Institute (PBI) in Tupelo, Mississippi. And as for my being, it hadn't even been thought of yet.

1960 was the year of my birth in the city of Memphis, Tennessee. By the time I was born, four daughters had been added to the Vondas Smith family, and my father had acquired a lot of experience in the ministry as well. My father labored in his home church in Jonesboro for some time after PBI. An open door presented itself in Newport, Arkansas, and there he labored and established a UPC church. He wrote for the Arkansas Pentecostal paper for a season. He moved to Memphis and assisted Rev. Marvin Hansford at Calvary United Pentecostal Church. Shortly after my birth, what was once known as the Whitehaven United Pentecostal Church was established in our home. At 14 years of age, I was taken off to Bolivia, South America, for another ministerial quest. I've often said that my first diaper was changed under a church pew.

My roots go way back into Pentecost. I was baptized in 1972 at the First United Pentecostal Church in Memphis pastored by none other than Rev. T. Richard Reed. Before that, I was dedicated to the Lord by Rev. Marvin Hansford at the Calvary United Pentecostal Church while yet in diapers. In 1973, at a revival service in Millington, Tennessee, hosted by Pastor Hazel Simpson, the evangelist Rev. Howard L. Smith moved me to an altar where I received the baptism of the Holy Ghost. Having grown cold in my walk with God, in the summer of 1978, I attended a Sunday evening service in West Memphis, Arkansas, where Rev. Bobby McCool pastored. The evening guest, Rev. George L. Glass, Sr., moved me to the altar again.

The message was beyond my ability to remember. I was taken to church that evening by my father's youngest brother, O'Neal Smith. While they practiced their choir number, I slipped around the corner and proceeded to become violently inebriated. All I remember of the service is thinking, "I must find a seat before I make a fool of myself." On the back row, I sat through songs, worship, and all the

preliminaries without recollection. Again, the message did not penetrate my inebriated mind. It wasn't until the altar call that I became conscientious of the tug of God on my heartstrings.

I stumbled to the altar that night and the church surrounded me like bees to honey. A backslidden Pentecostal missionary kid in the altar was a prize victim. But none of that moved me. Because while the host surrounding me was saying, "hold on," and "let loose," God had my undivided attention. His words to me that night came through clearly. "Will you preach for me?" His speech gave me pause.

It wasn't just the voice of God that caused me to sober up, rather the question itself. By this time in my life, I had seen far too much of the life of a minister, and I wasn't impressed. Per my exposure, preachers were all overworked, underpaid, and frequently were recipients of ridicule and the subsequent stress. It was not a life that I envisioned. It wasn't until my desperation to unload my sinful ways and the repeating of that question by God that I acquiesced and said, "yes." Immediately, the Holy Ghost moved upon me, and the portals of heaven were opened.

Now I would like to say that my walk with God went without rebellion from that day forward, but I can't. But I can say that in 1980, I answered the call by attending Jackson College of Ministries in Jackson, Mississippi. In 1982 I married Barbara Carpenter, a missionary kid to South Africa, and became licensed with the United Pentecostal Church International (UPCI) in 1983, continuing the family heritage. After Bible School, it began with a year working at a Christian School in Hazlehurst, Mississippi. For seven years we lived in Miami where I worked in both a Spanish and ultimately an English-speaking church. In late 1990, I was voted in as pastor of the United Pentecostal Church of Cedar Lake, Indiana.

The Marcus Smith family continued growing while in Indiana as did my ministerial experience and continued education by self-study into the Word of God. I was the poster child of a UPCI pastor, preacher, and parent. However, as I studied, I found some denominational teachings of the UPCI to be subjects best avoided, simply because they couldn't be made understandable in my mind. But I never denied them, nor did I debate them, I simply accepted and obeyed them without much fuss.

In 2009, my wife and I received the invitation to take an Associate Pastor position at a church back in my home state. My parents had retired back to Tennessee, they were up in years, and my thought was that it would be nice to be nearer to them in their aging years. And, after all, it was an open door! So, my wife and four daughters loaded up, sold off, and moved to southwest Tennessee. At first the excitement of a new ministerial venture masked the awkwardness of living in tiny evangelist quarters provided by the church. After a year had transpired, the promised pastoral transfer wasn't forthcoming and multiple promises with deadlines had come and gone. We therefore made the hard decision and resigned. It was a difficult time.

In a matter of days, God's faithfulness moved the Smiths into a larger living arrangement with an adequate income from my wife's employment and my occasional weekend preaching engagements. But this status didn't last long. My landlord, a member of the former church where I previously ministered, asked me if I would be willing to pastor again. A group of the church had walked off after a business meeting and were looking to establish an assembly of their own. I flatly rejected the offer. But I didn't have any other "open doors."

My wife, Barbara, and I sought God's guidance over the invitation. I spoke to both my father-in-law, parents, and even made a trip to the UPCI headquarters where I spoke to a former professor at my Bible

College who happened to be the Superintendent of the UPCI. None of these suggested that it would be unethical, nor would I be breaking UPCI bylaws by accepting the pastoral role. Subsequently, my wife and I went to a community center and met up with several family members for a discussion. My stipulations were clear. "If you'll accept the Articles of Incorporation that I had penned in Indiana, I'll submit my name for a vote." The group said, "Yes," and directly thereafter voted me in as pastor.

Grace Sanctuary was born in November 2011. This brought a considerable amount of backlash with the Tennessee District of the UPCI. I was eventually brought before the Tennessee District Board where I had to defend myself from accusations of ethical impropriety and bylaw violation. After receiving an ultimatum from the Tennessee District to either resign Grace Sanctuary or lose my UPCI license, I requested an appeal to a board known as MAC (Ministerial Advocacy Counsel) with the national organization. My day was granted, but it wasn't a bright one.

I was allowed two ordained ministers to sit at my table, but no one would acquiesce. Of my own family, both my father and father-in-law were of poor health and couldn't make the trip to Hazelwood, Missouri. Never were charges of immoral proprieties made against me. For there was none that could have been. The charge was that I had started a church without the permission of the Tennessee UPCI District with the inferred charge of splitting a church. After hours of presenting my case and listening to the District Superintendent and two other well-known Tennessee District ministers build their case, I could clearly see the writing on the wall.

The UPCI minister that chaired the board meeting drew me aside when all had ended and asked me "what if." I knew at that moment my case was lost. The board members, as is customary, gathered around me and had a season of prayer. One of those sitting on the Tennessee bench, pastor of a large Nashville church, dropped to his knees in a posture of humility during that prayer. The other minister who had sat on the Tennessee table had walked out in the middle of the hearing. Leaving that night from the UPCI headquarters, the Tennessee District Superintendent asked me to give him a ride back to the motel.

After dropping the Superintendent off at the motel, the same one where I was staying, I chose to take a ride through the streets of Hazelwood to gather my thoughts and review the events of the day. Never had I in life ever been under more stress than I was at that moment. I felt sure that the decision of the Ministerial Advocacy Counsel would not be going my way. They couldn't go against a District board, that would have been unconscionable. To not resign from Grace Sanctuary meant that I would have to surrender my ordination. To surrender my license would cause me to become disavowed by all those that I held dear. Keeping my ordination would require me to resign from the church that God had led me to pastor. It was a no-win situation which had me devastated.

It was at a traffic light somewhat northeast of the UPCI headquarters building where I heard the voice of God again. Tears rolling down my face, I was under an incredible load, and He simply said, "Have I not put before you an open door?" I didn't understand that statement then, and at times I must admit that I still don't fully comprehend what he was stating. In April 2015, I resigned from Grace Sanctuary when the church board chose to go a different direction parting from the previously adopted bylaws. I subsequently have gone into semi-retirement and into secular employment. But as I recall one minister once saying, "Old ministers never die, they just go on to glory."

After surrendering my UPCI ordination, an old family friend and minister spoke to me by phone and made this statement. "Marcus, you are in for a revelation." I was frankly incensed by that statement. For after 30 years of ministerial work, pastoring for 25 of those years, preaching hundreds of sermons on three continents, and thousands of hours of Bible study, what revelation was there for me to receive? Nevertheless, I have found his statement to be true. My eyes have been opened! God has revealed to me and taught me things I previously found obscure. Which brings us to the present.

This website is the offering of my continued study in the word of God without the imposition of a man-made organization dictating to my understanding. On many theological doctrines, I am more persuaded today than ever, due to my sole reliance of scripture. In other ecclesiastical themes, I have discovered former teachings were denominationally skewed. So here I am. Following God's leading to present Biblical truth without denominational influence, relying on scripture as the sole text and ministering to those who choose to give an ear. I'm not here to slander, point an accusatory finger, or exact some vendetta on anyone. Truthfully, I give honor to my heritage. Rather, I simply want to present to you "An Open Door" where you too can learn God's word and therein live in the glorious liberty that Christ Jesus affords us through His passion.

My prayer is that you too will receive revelation as we study God's Word together. For it is written, "*ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.*" (Jn. 8:32) It is my persuasion, "the truth" that we need to know, can't be found in the corridors of denominationalism, rather in the pages of the book we call the Bible. Perhaps through this web-based medium, someone can be facilitated into having "An Open Door" experience such as I. May God bless you and speak to you as we study The Bible together.