

I met Pastor Andy Walton as I was campaigning for Clearwater City Council in 2019. I was going door to door, and Andy was sweeping his driveway. We had a brief conversation, and he said I really needed to meet his wife, Peg. I did, and they have been good friends ever since.

Andy is the Pastor at Trinity Presbyterian Church at 2001 Rainbow Drive in Clearwater. It's right next door to Culver's (a restaurant I may frequent a little too often) at the corner of Hercules and Gulf to Bay. Andy and I sat down over lunch to talk about his ministry and leading by example and I followed up with a conversation with Peg.

Andy, how did you come to be a pastor? Short version: When I was in my late 30's I decided to leave a career in the theater and enter the seminary to become a minister. And then at age 40, I was ordained as a Presbyterian minister and became the pastor at a congregation, Forsyth Presbyterian Church, in middle Georgia, in a small town called Forsyth. I was there for 12 years, and that's where Peg and I raised our two girls. After that, we made a big change and moved to Washington, D.C. where I was the pastor of the Capitol Hill Presbyterian Church.

Peg, what was it like to suddenly have such a big change in your married life? Frankly, it was a rough transition. We had two small children, great jobs, a lovely old home we were renovating and a strong community of friends. When Andy told me he felt God was calling him into ministry, I told him God had the wrong number.

How did that move to DC come about? It's just the way our system works. When a pastor feels like it's time to move on, the pastor puts their name out there. It's just a system that our denomination has.

And when congregations are looking for pastors, they do the same thing. There's a matching process - and then of course - within church circles - there is a "grapevine" and I was matched with Capitol Hill Presbyterian Church in Washington DC. It was three blocks from the Capitol building. It actually seemed to be a strange match to me up until the point I realized the community on Capitol Hill is just a small town - just like Forsyth, Ga. It was a neighborhood - a village. We just had a lot of very important visitors on the weekends.

Peg, what were you working on in DC? During our time in DC I worked with three national organizations on workforce development. I lead the launch of a recruitment effort of the National Association of Manufacturers, "Dream It! Do It" that encouraged young people to engage in STEM education in order to prepare for careers in advanced manufacturing. Then I worked with Corporate Voices for Working Families to help corporations launch programming that developed skill levels of current employees and partnered with community and technical colleges to grow their employee base. Finally, when we left DC for Clearwater, I launched and was leading an initiative between the American Association of Community Colleges and AARP to help people over 50 receive the training needed to get back into the workplace after the recession. I continued this work from Clearwater for several years.

Did you both enjoy your time in DC?

Andy: We loved it! We were there for 12 years. But you know, you come to a place where you think, 'it's time to move on - I've done my work here.' You put your feelers out again - and wherever we were going I knew it was, because of my age, going to be my last place. And we came here, to Clearwater.

Peg: It was a true privilege to live in our nation's capital, three blocks from the Capitol building. DC is an amazing, vibrant city that I came to love over our years there. Yes, I enjoyed our time in DC!

Tell me about Trinity Presbyterian Church: This congregation is a congregation that has been in the community for nearly 70 years. Next year Trinity Presbyterian Church will celebrate its 70th anniversary. It's my understanding the founders first met in an American Legion building for a while. They also met at Skycrest Elementary for a while and then got organized and became a congregation and started to build this building we're in now.

And within 10 years or so the congregation had well over 1000 members. And as you can see from our building, this is a physical plan for a large congregation. At its peak in the 70s and early 80's there were 14-1500 in our congregation.

Like all mainline denominations have experienced for the past 30 years, though, there's been a decline in participation, so now we're basically a small congregation with a large facility and a big heart.

What's your congregation like?

Peg: People with big hearts and open arms.

Andy: This congregation is mission minded. We're really serious about doing things in the community, helping other people, and making our facility available to the community. Our aim right now is to really become a neighborhood church that serves our immediate neighborhood as well as the wider community. But first and foremost, we strive to serve our immediate neighborhood.

I love this congregation. It's a congregation that I think, regardless of who the pastor is, has got this spirit of action of doing and living out our faith and living our values. And as with all congregations, those values have changed. And we're living in a time now where things that are important are social justice, and equal rights, and climate and the environment. Those are things we take very seriously, and we approach our work from a faith perspective. One of our biggest responsibilities as humans is to take care of the earth. And so, you know, that kind of gives you an idea of the congregation itself.

I admire that your congregation is so intentional in their spirit of action – of living out their faith and values, and, in particular, those related to taking care of our planet. This summer, Trinity Presbyterian Church installed over 300 solar panels on your church rooftop. Can you explain how that came about?

Andy: Well, it is just so exciting to see how it was a vision, and then an idea, and then there was a plan. And as we're talking now, I'm looking out the window and the first solar panels are being placed on the roof. You know, people are going to be driving down Gulf to Bay and they'll glance over and see our solar panels. We'll have over 300 panels on our sanctuary roof, that's the big visible part, and we'll have more on our fellowship hall which is not quite as visible.

What have you calculated as your payback? We've calculated about a 9-10 year payback. Our Presbytery is helping us with an interest free loan that we will pay back through the savings on our electricity. We expect in about 9 years we'll have the loan paid off and after that, it's all gravy.

Are you expecting these solar panels to cover all your electricity needs? It's going to be pretty close. We calculate it will cover at least 90% of our costs. And thru some austerity programs, we may be able reach 100% of our electricity needs.

That's amazing!

Andy: The whole idea is to be good stewards -that 's our primary motivation, but it also makes economic sense. One of the big points of conversation in our congregation about this subject was, that this congregation is an aging congregation, and there's always talk about legacy - what are we leaving the next generation? And we came around to thinking - what better legacy could we leave the future of this congregation than to take off the saddle of a utility bill for this big facility? Frankly, our electricity bill eats up about a third of our budget every year. Now, we're giving our children and future congregants the gift of nearly free electricity – harnessed from the sun – clean, energy independence that is good for our environment.

Trinity Presbyterian Church is setting such a great example. I really appreciate your congregation being leaders that way. If other ministries or non-profits want to reach out to you to learn more, I'm assuming you'd welcome that?

Andy: Absolutely! If anyone wants to reach out to learn more, they can. We worked through a local solar co-op who worked with us to get the right installer and guided us through the process. You don't have to reinvent the wheel - you just have to let people know you want to do it and they'll come help you.

Even with the money?

Andy: Haha – even with the money.

Do you have a favorite sports team? Local or otherwise?

Andy: You know I am a big baseball fan; I have been most of my life. Wherever I am, I like to support the local team. Growing up in Atlanta, a piece of me is always going to be a Braves fan. Having spent a dozen years in DC, I also cheer for the Nationals. The first ten years the Nationals were in DC I lived so close I could walk to the stadium, and I bought a season ticket – so I became a Nationals fan. And then I

came here, and I've supported the Rays. I go to Threshers games; I just love baseball. But I have to be honest, I'm not as much a fan as I used to be because I've become quite disillusioned with seeing the salaries and the amount of money that the owners are making. It seems to me there's a lot of economic injustice, in all professional sports. But for just pure baseball – you can't beat it.

Peg: Like Andy, I'm a baseball fan. And I'm making a public commitment here to learn Pickleball. We have lots of friends playing and it looks like fun.

Do you have a favorite restaurant in Clearwater or a hidden gem of a place in Clearwater you like to visit?

Andy: You know we try to visit a lot of different places. We like to go downtown. We often gravitate to the beach. We frequent places that are close to our house like Monty's Pizza or Sophia's Greek Café. We also like **Skycrest Brewery**.

Peg: I like the atmosphere of Cleveland Street downtown, eating outside in pleasant weather, from any of the good restaurants down there. We also look for good Mexican food that is plentiful in Clearwater.

Is there anything the city can do to help you as a church or anything that you'd like to see changed in our city or worked on or prioritized?

Andy: I think one of our biggest problems, and I know you have a heart for this as well, is affordable housing. something that we need to work on as a community, is to develop some partnerships between government and between faith-based organizations and other nonprofit businesses, to create a network collaborative of all these different entities to get people in some affordable housing. It seems like, right now, it's just some hit-or-miss sort of thing.

I recently read an article about the city of Houston and its program to address housing needs. And it's a big city. It has statistically eliminated its homeless problem. By creating a collaborative network of all these different entities to get people into affordable housing. I think that's something we should be dealing with. Here is a link to the article: "[How Houston moved 25,000 people from the streets into homes of their own](#)"

Peg: I would like to see city leaders and employers working together to define jobs of the future in our community and the skillsets required to fill these jobs, then work more closely with education providers to assure employers will have the workforce needed for a progressive future and that employees are paid a living wage.

Do you have a favorite Bible passage or quote you navigate by?

Andy: You know I can't say that I do. That might be strange coming from a pastor. I try not to pull things out of context in scripture and try to keep things within the context of the larger picture. But I guess - this doesn't come from the Bible - sort of a summary of the Bible. A friend of mine, a professor

of religion at Mercer University said you can sum of the gospel in this phrase: ‘The worse thing is never the last thing.’ And that’s it. And you read though the Bible and that’s the message. No matter how bad it gets, something’s coming. Something new is coming.

Peg: I think we should continuously be growing and evolving as a loving, inclusive, and compassionate people, and my Biblical reference for this is Romans 12:2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

What are your plans for the future?

Andy: Who knows? We’re just going to take it one day at a time. And just sort of ease into our next chapter and see what develops. We have family in Baltimore and Atlanta; we’ll be visiting them and seeing some friends and see where it leads us.

Peg: It sounds cliche, but we are going to travel a lot more in our retirement.

Any final thoughts?

Peg: I’d like to see concrete steps made toward creating greater unity and less conflict in our public discourse. I think we have more in common than we realize. It would be nice if we could pull together for the betterment of all.

Andy: I think Trinity’s been here for 70 years and it’s still here - we never closed during COVID - we were on the cutting edge of doing things online. This congregation has always been here and it’s going to keep going. I’m retiring in a couple of months. We already have our next pastor -as a co-pastor right now. Dr. Reverend Dawn Condi. She’s here and she’s on the job.

And so this congregation is going to keep going and it’s always, always going to be a congregation that is about action and putting faith to work in our community.

Talk about a smooth transition!