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Dr. Jerry Andrews
Senior Pastor
First Presbyterian Church
San Diego California 92101

Dear Pastor Andrews,

I am sure getting a letter from a Prosecutor from West Virginia had to have caught your eye, and you may have wondered why is he writing to you. I have a story to tell you about your Church, First Presbyterian.

I need to go back to the beginning, almost 40 years ago this year. I came to San Diego from a small town in West Virginia of about 4,500 people, to get a law school education at California Western School of Law. I was 30 years old and had done a lot since my undergraduate college days. But the one thing I wanted to do was to practice Law with my father. When I got accepted there, I jumped at the chance. I was fortunate, even though I come from a small town I had spent a couple of summers studying overseas in the Scandinavian countries, Germany and Austria. So traveling was not something I was afraid of. In fact, I had always wanted to go to San Diego, I grew up being an old America Football League fan, I remembered watching games on the TV from old Balboa Stadium.

In August of 1980 I set out for San Diego... When I arrived at the Law School, they directed me to my apartment I shared with 8 other students. The only problem was we were living was right across the street from a bar that stayed open until 2am in the morning, 6 days a week, which made studying at the apartment complex almost impossible. The noise was non-stop from 7-2 in the morning.

My mother was a strong Christian woman, she taught Bible as a class at our high school, and was extremely knowledgeable. While we were Baptist, she made me promise her I'd find a church to attend when I got to San Diego. I scouted the area out, and the closest church to where I was living, was First Presbyterian. So my first Sunday I attended worship services there. I enjoyed it, the people were friendly, and the worship service was interesting.



Things went well for me, my first 3 weeks there, except it was becoming harder and harder to study with the noise from the bar across the street. It was difficult to sleep, it was a real pain. We were far enough away from the law school that walking at night was not a good idea.

I got up to go to church on my 3rd Sunday there, as I walked to church I could smell smoke, the closer I got to First Pres. the stronger the smoke had become. As I arrived there I notice all the chairs line up on the street facing the church. The front of the Sanctuary, (except the Christ window) including the pipe organ and all the pips, had been destroyed, as well as the downstairs kitchen area. You can imagine how upset the congregation was, as well as , the staff of the Church. But they were having church service outside in spite of the damage. There was still fire trucks in the surrounding streets.

As I sat there listening to the service, a voice inside me said the Church needed a night watchman, in return I could have a quiet place to study. The more I resisted the idea the stronger it became. So after the service concluded, I went up to Rev. Burton Smith who I had enjoyed listening to, and told him who I was and what I was willing to do for the Church. I actually couldn't believe I was doing it. He looked at me like I was crazy, but he told me to talk to the Church Administrator on Monday. While I had played 4 years of college football, and I never backed away from a fight, I had no training on being a night watchman But I did need a quiet place to study. My roommate thought I was crazy when I told him.

On Monday morning between classes, I met with the Church Administrator, told him what I was willing to do. He asked me how much money I wanted paid, I told him I just wanted a place to study, the church could keep their money. He told me to come back at 3pm. He had to talk to the members of the Session. When I came back, he handed me a set of keys and a custodian took me around to all the doors. I guess the idea was crazy enough, they didn't need to check me out.

My first two nights there people broke into the church, in places that weren't secure after the fire. I'd called 911, the police arrived, they were caught. I won't tell you I didn't have second thoughts, or I didn't carry around a baseball bat. But once the word got out on the streets, that someone was in the church, I had no more. I'd show up about 7pm and leave at 6am go back to my apt. take a shower and go to class, between classes I'd come back to the church and either study or take a nap. By my second year the church didn't really need me anymore, but the Administration and staff wanted me around anyway. So for the next two years I stay in the church till 10-11 at night. I'd walk people to their cars after evening meetings and events, it was still a great place to study and I had a place to park my vehicle. There were times I'd fill in when a custodian was sick, or run errands for the administration or the staff.



The people of First Pres. were a blessing to me. My roommate and I got free tickets to so many events in San Diego, and finals week, members always baked us cookies, I can't begin to tell you all the things members of that church did for me. . I ended up becoming a member, teaching a Sunday School Class. Sometimes I'd lead the church in Sunday morning prayer. Talk about a country boy being under the protection and care of the Holy Spirit, I was.

I was once asked to explain how the Ladle Fellowship began by some people at First Pres. many years ago I couldn't do it then. But I will now. Please forgive the use of the word I, it was never me. The Lord had set this into motion long before my time... I had become close friends with Rev. Smith and his family, I always had Thanksgiving and Easter dinner with them while I was there. My roommate and I would house set his house, and dog when he and his wife left town. One day we were talking about all the professional people who walked to work downtown, I came up with the idea of serving them coffee and donuts on their way to work . I agreed to take the lead in that. I was in my 3rd year of school, I had time. It started out well, but then the homeless people started coming around. I had no problem with that, but the City Tree school complained to the Session Board, we had to stop it. I had always been taught, there are angels among us and they don't come dressed in 3 piece suits. So I never judged a person by what they wear or how they smell.

In January of 1983, when I came back from Christmas brake Rev. Smith asked me to come up and see him, he had a project he wanted to talk to me about. His office was upstairs of the Sanctuary. He told me about an idea he wanted to set in motion where the church would offer a meal on Sunday to the homeless people in the area. There was no church or organization who offered a meal to those people on Sunday. I told him it was a great idea but it would be a hard sell to the Session and the people in the church. It was a homeless person who had broke in and started the fire in 1980, while 99% of those people were harmless, members of the church were afraid of them. There were times I understood their fear. There were times those people could be difficult.

He told me he couldn't be the one to present the idea to the Session , but a committee could. He had hand selected a committee with all people agreeing to serve but the committee needed a chairman. He wanted that chairman to be me. I had never said no to anything Rev. Smith had asked me to do. But this time was different, I gave him every excuse I could think of, from the fact I was leaving in 4 months, to finally, why would anyone listen to me. I had no authority or power in the church. As we ended the conversation he told me to think about it.



As I walked down the steps from his office, I heard that inner voice say say to me, now you know why you're here. See, I was glad to be in law school in San Diego, but I never understood why I couldn't get accepted to a school closer to home. I can't tell you how many times I asked God why California. I was 2,000 miles from home. There was never an answer. I froze on the steps, I had finally gotten my answer, I turned around and walked back up the stairs into his office and told him I would do it. He handed me a paperback book to read, *Hand Me Another Brick*, the story of Nehemiah. A book I've have used from time to time in the last 40 years. A book of leadership.

The people he selected on that committee were fantastic, and unbelievable people. They were the type of people who were in the minority of the membership of the church at that time, but were strong believers with big hearts. Sometimes we would meet 3-4 times a week in order to develop a presentation to the Session. In February, we met with the Session knowing our project wouldn't get considered ... Within 30 minutes we were shot down. The fear was great among Session, while they had asked some good questions, their hearts were hard. There was a new disease that floated around called Aids, of course, one could find needles around the church property almost any day. They said they had budgeted money for different groups in San Diego to take care of those people, and majority of the church membership wanted no personal contact with those people.

We had decided we weren't going to let the first "no" stop us, we prayed and reorganize our vision. A month later approached the Session again. They were surprised we had showed up. We were prepared, hearts began melting, and they treated us totally different. The questions now were now how much would it cost, safety precautions, what meals were we planning on serving, and could we get enough volunteers. You could tell the Holy Spirit had been at work. We came back in April with a complete game plan. The Session was so impressed they gave us additional money, we hadn't asked for. The majority of the church membership actually became excited. Fear had been replaced, by love...

I have no idea how many times our committee met those 4 months, or the time that was put into the project by our group. I have never been with a part of a better group of people. I saw the power of God at work first hand. I never got to attend the 1st ladle dinner, I had left by then, but my committee did send me the 1st Ladle used.

The story could end there, but when I got back home the physical plant of my church was falling apart. It was built during the Civil War, added onto 2-3 times. We needed a new church, but we only had \$25,000 in a building fund. It was going to cost us about 1.5 million. We only averaged about 120 for the Sunday service. Most people in the church saw it as impossible. But after my experience at First Presbyterian, I knew nothing was impossible if the Lord was leading the program. The trustees got tired of hearing me complain, and agreed to let me form a committee. All I needed was a committee I could hand pick. In 3 years , we were in a brand new church debt free. I took what I had been taught by the Ladle Committee at First Presbyterian, together with the power of our Lord, it was amazing.

I'm 70 years old now, hopefully going on 50. I got to work with my father until he died in 1993, I worked as an Assistant Prosecutor for 14 years and I've been the the elected Prosecutor for 21 years. I've served as President of the West Virginia Prosecuting Attorneys Association, I'm currently Chairman of the Board of Director's of the West Virginia Prosecutors Institute, and a Board of Director of the National District Attorneys Association. Back in 2015 one of my cold cases appeared on a national syndicated TV show Cold Justice... The Lord has truly blessed me, and I have never forgotten my days at First Presbyterian....

During this virus I have listened to your church services, while the complexion of the church has changed, as have all mainstream churches, your mission hasn't. God still blesses that church. You are the church on the hill that provides the light to all San Diego. I pray you will continue to do so.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John". The signature is stylized with a large, sweeping initial "J" and a long, horizontal flourish extending to the right.