

## **FaithLife Stories: Brian Abernathy**

*Parishioner Brian Abernathy is a recent convert to the Catholic Church and attended the RCIA program at OMC. He is First Deputy Managing Director for the City of Philadelphia with a portfolio that includes public safety. He and his wife, Elizabeth, live with their two daughters, Helen and Vanessa, in Mt. Airy.*

“I was born outside of Boston and just before my fifteenth birthday, we moved to Pine Bluff, Arkansas. I was raised as a Methodist and in Massachusetts we belonged to a small congregation in a church that I would say was moderate to liberal. The church was always there in our life – my parents’ values were based on their faith but they didn’t talk about it a lot.

“Pine Bluff was a small town with three white Methodist churches, Baptist churches, AME, Seventh Day Adventists, Presbyterian, and one small Catholic church. The Methodists were more liberal than the others. It was a welcoming church and not racist, but it was still a product of where it was.

“Growing up Protestant taught me that my relationship with God was very personal and liturgy, communion and other things important in the Catholic Church were very less important. The church in Pine Bluff was very much about a hierarchy of teachings, a dogmatic approach that said, ‘If you don’t believe this, you’re not one of us. I am right and you are wrong.’

“For most of high school, I went to an international boarding school in New Mexico run by United World College. Its purpose was to promote world peace and only about 25% of the students were American. It was a fairly left-leaning campus, and I was exposed to Communism, Marxism – it was a free flow of ideas and expression. I even became a member of the Socialist Club!

“By the time I graduated from high school, I was an agnostic, not religious at all. Organized religion was not speaking to me; I wasn’t comfortable anymore with a church that I felt was judging me with its self-righteousness. I couldn’t believe anymore in Christ’s birth and Resurrection. I thought that religion provided false comfort for many but enabled people in power to stay in power. And yet in high school, a kid from Poland had said to me, ‘The Bible is such a great story. Why not believe in it anyway?’ And somehow that always stuck with me.

“I went on to Coker College in Hartsville, South Carolina. I have always loved the South for the same reason I love Philadelphia: there is a strong sense of community, where everybody knows each other. Philadelphia is the first big city where I ever felt comfortable. After college, I was an intern at a think tank in D.C. and then came here in 2000 to work at the Arden Theatre, eventually in the development office. I’m still a board member there.

“I got into Philadelphia politics when a friend recommended me as legislative aide to City Councilman Frank DiCicco. Frank is a consensus-driven guy and helped soften my edges. He taught me “compromise” is not a dirty word. But eventually, I was getting a reputation for being ruthless in electoral politics. It takes a special person to not let it eat you alive and take over you, your family and your reason. For that reason, I decided to get out of electoral politics and into city management.

“My wife was from an Irish Catholic background but had become an on-again, off-again Catholic. We were married at Old St. Joe’s because Elizabeth’s parents would have been upset if it wasn’t a Catholic wedding. We meandered a bit religiously, sometimes trying Old St. George’s Methodist. But when the kids came, we had to ask ourselves, ‘Do we want to raise them in the Catholic Church or find another approach to faith?’

“We enrolled the girls at Norwood Academy because we weren’t teaching them anything about faith at home and thought this was a good foundation. We walked into OMC for the first time shortly after my father had died. The more we attended, the more I was able to heal from that loss. The ease of conversation in this parish facilitated the decision to have our children baptized here. In my soul searching then, I realized I needed a foundation in life. And I felt comfortable here. It was like an organic sense of belonging to the Roman Catholic Church.

“We all have our challenges with the faith, but I found Christ’s central message here, the message of mercy, love, compassion and self-sacrifice, from the first time I came to OMC. I now have an understanding of the Eucharist and the power it brings and I have a deeper understanding of the Gospels. They seem to speak to me more clearly.

“Sister Christine and the RCIA program had amazing impact on me, especially the message of Christ’s mercy... that we all have something to be sorry about. The very first time we came here was right after the Supreme Court ruling on gay marriage. Father Bob gave a homily that was the most compassionate message. He said we don’t have to embrace the lifestyle but we do have to love the person as Christ loves. I know it may cause some consternation, but I do accept gay relationships...who is to say that love in my life is more pure than a man’s love for his husband?

“One of my fears about the Catholic Church was the arch-conservative reputation of this archdiocese, and that still causes me some consternation even though I know the Archbishop approaches his role with love. But there are a handful of parishes with reputations for being truly open, welcoming and accepting and this is certainly one of them.”