



## CHAPTER TWO: ORIGINS

March 6, 2024

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**“The spiritual life is a stern choice. It is not a consoling retreat from the difficulties of existence, but an invitation to enter fully into that difficult existence, and there apply the Charity of God and bear the cost.”**

– Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941)

Ah, the ‘60’s! While I was trying to figure out a lot of things about God that have always been above my pay grade, I was also trying to figure out love and vocation. Lest I give you the impression that life was all seriousness, I also got introduced to jazz during that time and played lots of sports with the guys.

Susan and I were married the summer before my final year of university. With a freshly minted certificate from Teacher’s College, she became the chief bread winner of our household, her income supplemented by my summer earnings from janitorial work in Toronto’s subway system.

I graduated into a burgeoning economy filled with opportunity. Housing was inexpensive, and jobs were abundant. Even with an English degree, companies were hungry to recruit me. Being on the leading edge of the Baby Boom placed me in a privileged position, one that I only fully appreciate looking back from today’s harsher realities.

I went to work for Canada Life in a Marketing Management Sales training program. But after a year I couldn’t see myself selling insurance, so I went to Procter & Gamble—this time selling shortening to the bakery, restaurant, and institutional trade. Most mornings, I studied the scriptures and read Puritan and reformed theologians, trying to make sense of what I understood about God. Many of the morning habits of study and prayer that I began back then—more out of longing than comfortable study—continue to this day.

While at P&G, I also volunteered on weekends at a Christian youth camp near Orangeville, and Susan and I bought our first house nearby. But even though the company liked my work they didn’t like me being distracted by volunteer activity. One day my sales manager told me I had a choice to make; I was either fully committed to the company, or I wasn’t. Not long

after, I turned in the keys to my company car. I didn't want to settle for financial security even though I was still unclear about my vocational calling.

Our house was very close to the camp, and we sort of fell into becoming fully involved as staff. Our firstborn, Heidi, was born during that period, and funds for the basics were scarce. But we persevered. I was leading bible studies, speaking at summer campfires, youth retreats, and churches, leading singing, and trail rides, cleaning the barn—all the normal stuff of elegant ministry. My parents thought I'd lost my mind, particularly as the financial plan was to do the work, tell nobody but God about your needs, and trust that needs would be met. They always were met, but it was sketchy at the best of times.

Susan became involved in a coffee group at the local Westminster United Church, and that church eventually became a relational and spiritual home for both of us for many years. Even 50 years later, I can see how many of the relationships that began through that group have sustained and supported us to the present day.

As time went on the all-consuming nature of the work at the camp created conflict with my desire to be a father and husband. To pursue the missional call, even at the expense of family, was almost celebrated in evangelical culture of the time. But the continual need to prove myself fed my natural insecurity and wasn't good for me, Susan, or Heidi.

In May 1975, I received an invitation to join the staff of Youth for Christ. The next nearly nine years that I spent with that organization provided terrific opportunities to learn about leadership, creative communication, and—through some significant failures on my part—humility.

My first two years with YFC, I was a youth worker in an Etobicoke high school, learning to build bridges through relationships, fun events, retreats, and drawing kids with their own circles of friends into a larger circle focussed on discovering Jesus. At the same time, I was building friendships with staff across the country through regional and national conferences. YFC's president, Brian Stiller, came alongside me to widen my vision for leadership. I saw myself as a simple youth worker, but he helped me see that I had potential as a leader because of the influence he saw me unwittingly exert at those staff events.

At the same time, a group of Orangeville friends asked if I'd consider starting a work among youth and couples there. Brian immediately jumped at this chance to start another YFC chapter and so "Highlands Youth for Christ" was born in 1977. It continues to this day and has grown to have a much larger footprint in many towns in Ontario.

By that time Luke had also been born, and we decided to build a house on an acreage outside town. So, with two young kids, we embarked on a roller coaster of an adventure as we labored to build both a brand-new ministry and home. The ministry grew and we had plenty of influence in the local high school of over 2000 kids, which was composed of a very different mix of cultures and backgrounds than we had become familiar with in the more homogenous, suburban Etobicoke school.

I was green as grass in many ways. But with the help of friends, we incorporated and received a charitable receiving designation. My inexperience proved itself at the two-year mark when

the board I'd recruited began to favour a non-governance, managerial style. I had recruited badly and managed them badly. I resigned in frustration. Today I recognize that the failure was mine, not theirs. But the experience planted seeds of curiosity in me about the care and management of charitable boards and sparked a learning curve that continues to this day.

Once again Brian Stiller got involved, disbanding the board, and inviting me to come to YFC's National Office to lead a new Field Ministry department. I operated the local Highlands YFC out of my office as I embarked on the national work. Over the next nearly five years my role expanded, and as Vice President Field Ministries I travelled the country supporting and training staff, helping boards, and speaking at recruiting events. It was a change from being in direct ministry with kids to encouraging and influencing others who were.

It was during those travels that I first started plugging into the loneliness of leaders. Even though I was there on YFC business, once we had taken care of that business, the real conversations began. As I listened to ministry workers talk about their lives, work, and family challenges it became clear that such conversations were the more important thing.

Travel gave me another sort of education around that time. I was invited be part of a team that travelled to Thailand, then Burma, Sri Lanka, Bombay, Delhi, Calcutta, and finally Nepal. It was my first international travel, and in Calcutta I felt like I was meeting my Waterloo. The overwhelming poverty there was just beyond my comprehension and ability to process.

While we were there, my colleague Jim Wilson, Vice President of YFC International, was due to preach at a Pentecostal Church, and I was asked to bring greetings. It was a big church, run by a Canadian, and doing meaningful work amongst the poorest of the poor in Calcutta, with a Pentecostal twist.

As the service ended, people began to come forward for prayer. From my place on the platform, I remember seeing one woman, dressed in what looked like a potato sack, wearing high-top running shoes with no laces. She came forward, obviously desperately poor, and not clean. I remember thinking, "God, I hope I don't have to touch her."

I didn't. But as we headed on to Nepal, I went into a deep funk. I was so embarrassed by my own reactions, and so overwhelmed by the enormity of what I had seen. My inability to engage or even to want to engage with that woman provoked something of an existential crisis. Jim sensed my struggles. He said: "Look, we've got to go talk. It's overwhelming, isn't it?" And then he added something I've never forgotten. "You know we are never going to be able to be enough. We can only be whatever we can be."

Today, so much of my understanding of the gospel is that we are incarnational presences to others; that is, we become the presence of Christ, that Christ is in us, and we engage with people as the presence of Christ, wherever we go.

But out of that experience, Susan and I committed that whatever I ended up becoming or doing, a significant portion of my time, energy, and money would go towards supporting poverty relief and justice issues.

My time with YFC had been an exhilarating ride. But things can change in a moment. And they did; a new president was installed, and we did not work well together. I was given my notice 10 days before Christmas in 1983. I was told I would be paid to the end of the month.

The next day I met with my morning prayer group and told them my story. They were business and professional guys, and they balked when I shared my thought that an appropriate Christian response would mean that I would have to accept what they were offering. They quickly disabused me of that notion and approached the YFC Board with a proposal that I be paid until the following June if my supporters continued to provide for my salary and benefits. The Board agreed, and the first six months of 1984 became for me a time of freedom and exploration.

Yet I was wounded, angry, at a loss. My journals for the first couple of months were filled with cries of injustice and failure. The Apostle Paul said, "I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining the resurrection from the dead." (Philippians 3:10,11 NIVUK) It may seem ridiculous that I clung to this verse, and connected my pain with Christ's suffering, but doing so gave me hope, and helped me put my feelings of loss and rejection in proper perspective. After a couple of months, I burned those journals to avoid reliving anger and resentment, and to allow myself to move on to the next chapter.

Looking back, I realize that living through that experience was excellent preparation for the work that would become Touchstone. People get fired all the time. It's painful, affects our spouse and kids, and our very identity. Through the generosity of friends, I was given the opportunity to participate in a pro bono executive outplacement counselling program, which gave me not only a place to go regularly, but access to a wise counselor, and many testing and teaching sessions that allowed me to see how I had been blind to many of my own weaknesses, which had ultimately contributed to my exit.

But they also helped me identify my strengths; the first question they asked was, "In one sentence, what would be the best job for you?"

"To be a friend to leaders in the marketplace," I answered. As we worked on polishing up my resume, that thought remained with me.

I also asked former colleagues to honestly identify how I evidenced healthy leadership and a gift for ministry, as well as less helpful traits. I learned that my most fruitful work occurred in an informal style and setting.

I met with many people, interviewed for jobs, and developed friends in "The Fellowship" in Canada and the U.S. who helped me see a behind-the-scenes model of ministry, which I found attractive. (You may know of this group as the National Prayer Breakfast in Ottawa or Washington, but they have extensive friendship circles around the world. What I perceived to be an unhealthy connection between American civil religion and Jesus ultimately caused me to lessen this contact, while remaining respectful friends.)

That February I accepted an assignment from Prison Fellowship Canada to lead a five-day teaching session at Edmonton Maximum Security Prison. The curriculum I was to use had been developed by Prison Fellowship, and I followed along as best I could.

It was based on a standard evangelistic pattern, with a day each devoted to the separation of humanity from God, the need for forgiveness and forgiveness of sin, Jesus as the bridge for reconciliation between God and humanity. Sixty intimidating faces looked at me for each session, but cordiality ruled the day.

The fourth day, however, proved to be different. Our subject was reconciliation and forgiveness of others once we'd benefited from Jesus' reconciliation. I blithely started to tell these men that they needed to be reconciled and forgive others. One prisoner at the back of the room stood, crossed his muscular arms across his chest, and spat out, "You don't know what you're talking about; if a Pig kills my brother, I kill a Pig." Like bursting popcorn other voices erupted saying, "You don't know what you are talking about," "You're a square John," "You've never been pistol-whipped by a gauntlet of guards," "Your mother wasn't a drug addict."

Fortunately, the chaplain interrupted, "Let's break for coffee." I was immediately surrounded by the men—not angry but frustrated because they knew I didn't understand their stories. Talking about forgiveness clearly sounded absurd to their ears.

I phoned home that night asking Susan to get friends to pray for me—mainly for peace in the room the next day, because I still had to complete Day 5. The next day, I threw away our pre-planned outline and stood in front of the group. "You are right," I began. "I'm a terrible representative of Jesus. I'm a square John who doesn't connect with you in any meaningful way."

And then I asked, "Would you do me a favour? Think about what your experience would have been, if you had shared a cell with Jesus as he went from courtroom to courtroom through gauntlets of guards."

The question prompted genuine reflection, and their replies brought tears to my eyes as they imagined Jesus with them. "He would have learned more about me than I would have about him ... He would have listened to me." They went on, obviously listening to Jesus directly. Later they invited me to join in the closing communion line, clearly having forgiven me for my shallow teaching about forgiveness the previous day. As I was preparing to leave, a group of First Nations men approached me. "Do you notice anything different?" they asked, before continuing, "We did not wear our headbands today. The first four days we came in war, but today we removed our headbands to show we came in peace."

It was a seminal moment of discovery. I learned the power of getting out of the way, of letting Jesus be the focus of reflection. I experienced that there can be much goodwill in unlikely places. I also learned about releasing personal wounds and anger in forgiveness and reconciliation.

Those first six months of 1984—which led up to the decision to start Touchstone—were a time of nurturing my own inner journey with Jesus. I was discovering that my limits around incarnational communication could be overcome by allowing others to experience His story and words directly.

During that time, Susan and I laid the groundwork for discernment, and explored what it meant to be “called.” At the foundation of it all for us was a sense of unity between us. We knew that when we agreed, we could face challenges together; but if we have given grudging agreement to one another, then it’s very easy when times get tough to want to turn away and do something different. Our situation was complex; our kids were young, we had our house in the country, and our idea was to establish the ministry in Toronto amongst the business and professional communities. What we imagined doing could put at risk all that our family had been building together in our community.

With that groundwork, in June ’84 we invited a group of friends to our home for a weekend to help us discern next steps. Discussion had begun about the possibility of something like Touchstone, but we had a couple of other job opportunities to consider. The point wasn’t just about what I would do, but about how the whole family would embrace the uncertain future.

We felt alone when they all went home again at the end of the weekend, knowing that there was only a small amount of money in a bank account left over from my ministry days at Youth for Christ. But we had a definite sense of what we were going to do; we had agreed on the need for friendship in Christ among leaders in business, and other communities. There was much still to be determined; we needed a name, an incorporation and charitable tax number, a mission statement, values, methods, and money.

The Monday following that momentous weekend, Oscar Petersen and his trio played at Roy Thompson Hall. My brother-in-law Terry Madison and I went and basked in the music. At one point, Oscar asked his trio to leave the stage, and said he was going to play a new composition called “Love Ballade” for only the second time in public. As he played, I felt a unique connection between the creative one on stage and our Creator. I sat transfixed, and the word “maranatha” ran through my mind as he played. As we left the concert hall, “Come Lord Jesus,” was on my mind. Terry suggested this was all a grace note from God affirming the weekend’s decision.

Over the next few months, we arrived at the name, “Touchstone.” It wasn’t until our tenth anniversary that we really discovered its meaning, but we liked the sound of it. A touchstone was a black grooved stone in which gold was rubbed to test its quality by the residue left in the groove. To us, Touchstone became about being spiritually tested for authenticity as we are brought into relationship with Jesus and with one another.

The summer of ’84 was filled with meetings around incorporating, obtaining a tax number, and all the issues of governance, by-laws, and objects that needed defining. Money was tight but opportunities for conversation were rich as I met with hundreds of people.

We wanted to begin with relationships, not events. We wanted to be free to serve anyone who asked, regardless of size or capacity to pay. It meant I needed to be paid by Touchstone and

serve freely without expectation of return. That was one of our founding principles: that if I was to be about the work of friendship, I couldn't compromise that work by asking our constituents for money. It would be the responsibility of the board and a few friends to make sure such asks were taken care of discreetly. Susan and I had learned that just because we believed we were called to serve and believed that God would provide for our needs, it did not mean anyone else was obligated to meet that need, regardless of what they received from Touchstone.

It became my job to create a Vision statement for the board, and their job to assess, adjust, or reject it. It was a voyage of discovery right from the get-go; but the learning curve was around discovering the important ingredients of friendship, the spiritual needs of high-drive leaders (primarily men in the early days), and the ways to bring people into conversations about life and God whose main connection might be the Bay Street corridor. We didn't have the conviction that anything would "work," but we had an inkling that just going out and spending time with men and women in their worlds, on their terms would be a good place to start.

Over the nearly four decades since, I have always been grateful for the sense that I have been called by God to this work, but the call has been confirmed and adjusted over time by those who have been my spiritual priests. We tried as much as possible to make decisions on a consensus basis out of the conviction that such agreement would reveal the mind of Christ.

That first year was a time of significant growth and testing. I developed new friendships, renewed historic ones, and began to build a virtual community of friends while doing the grunt work of incorporating a new charity.

By the time we approached our first anniversary and things were falling into place organizationally, funds were tight, and the ministry felt like it had stalled. I wondered if it had all been a mistake, and whether I ought to have studied toward ordination. When I shared these thoughts with Bob Scrivens our minister at Westminster, he looked at me and said, "When I hear you say this, something in my spirit dies. Stay with the Spirit and persevere.

With the help of friends, I came to understand this difficult time as my wilderness testing. Jesus had been tested with the very things that he would face at the cross, confirming he had the strength to overcome them and to accomplish his mission. I believed I was being tested to see if it was worth enduring the pain to serve the needs of our target audience. Confirmation came. The ministry began to blossom. And that time of testing helped me build the strength to persevere.

Further tests would come of course. But so would opportunities.

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## A TOUCHSTONE TESTIMONIAL

What I saw Norm do with colleagues within YFC, he went on to do with others through Touchstone. He had uncommon skills in relating to people—staff regularly sought his friendship and learned from his counsel—and he knew how organizations worked. Given his experience of being pushed out of YFC, he understood the emotional consequences. But he refused to allow that incident to tarnish his own sense of calling, choosing to use the experience as a bridge into a unique ministry whose focus was to encourage and equip others.

To know Norm is to be befriended, and in that friendship, there is both trust and security; what is said is held in confidence, and judgment is far from his mind. Through my friendship with Norm came a new understanding of God at work in my life as Norm shared new insights and means of devotion he'd discovered within Celtic spiritual practice and reflection. Embedded in that was his articulation of friendship, finding its origin in Jesus. While this wasn't revolutionary, its practice brought about a new kind of understanding as to what it meant to walk with Christ.

Touchstone gave Norm freedom from many organizational restraints, and opportunity to lock in appointments with leaders in vocational ministry and business. His bible studies and group meetings became a source of spiritual well-being for many. Friends would speak of what they were learning at these regularly planned meetings, and many felt Norm's personal touch in one-on-one encounters as people sought to unravel themselves from troubling issues and circumstances. We all were looking for a deeper understanding of what the gospel meant and how it applied in our lives.

Through Touchstone, some 25 years ago a group of us began meeting regularly: twice a year we would go on a three-day retreat north of Toronto. All of us were involved in some kind of salaried ministry—pastoring, teaching, or leading organizations—which gave us much in common on issues of personnel, public service, finances, family, and our individual walks with Christ. The eight of us learned to trust each other. We enjoyed being together. We had much to share and much more to learn. It worked because Norm was the center of making it happen and he took lead of the hours we had together. We had lots of free time to talk, laugh, and listen to music, acquainting me with performers outside of my musical genre. The time was both informal, exchanging ideas on the gospel, and it was formal, using a liturgical format for worship—all with an unabashed interest in locating ourselves in the Christ whom all of us so want to serve.

I consider myself deeply privileged to have been a part of this group, and to have been the beneficiary of their love and discipline in framing values and ideas for life and ministry.

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- Brian Stiller, Global Ambassador, World Evangelical Alliance

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## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR DISCUSSION:

1. As Norm details the trajectory of his career—up to Touchstone’s inception—it’s possible to see how God was at work in his life. What are some ways you see the hand of God in Norm’s story?
2. Think about your own life’s path. Through the highs and lows, what are some ways that you have seen God work in your life?
3. Norm shares honestly about his internal response when he saw the poor woman at the church in Calcutta. If we are honest with ourselves, we have probably all had times of thoughts about others that might now bring us shame. The shame points to our growth. Can you remember a similar experience in your own life and how it prompted you to grow in your faith or knowledge of Christ?
4. Norm’s experience in the prison taught him “the power of getting out of the way, of letting Jesus be the focus of reflection.” Is this a new thought for you? If so, how might you put Jesus at the focus of your own reflections this week? If not, what was one time when you placed Jesus at the centre of your reflections, and he taught you something new about himself?
5. In establishing Touchstone, Norm and Susan and their family took a big risk. As you think about the nature of the risk they took—foregoing the security of a steady income to start a new, untried ministry venture—what are your thoughts? What risks have you willingly taken for Christ?
6. Norm writes that his time of testing, of feeling in the wilderness, helped build in him strength to persevere. As you think about your own life, what is a period of testing that you have endured? What did it teach you?

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## A TOUCHSTONE TESTIMONIAL

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